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„Social media in the Lebanese media landscape -
contesting media hegemony and discursive spaces: the
case of Megaphone“

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Abbreviations

DMG	Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft
SNS	Social Network Sites
WANA	West Asia and North Africa

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1 Introduction

Social Media played a vital role in the upheavals of the different revolutions that took place in West Asia and North Africa (WANA)¹ throughout 2011. Networking and mobilization via Facebook or Twitter were vital features in order to organize demonstrations and interventions as well as to share news from the ground with a broader international audience. However, the use of social media has evolved within the past ten years and has shaped the media landscapes in a profound way. Next to the features of social media such as the immediate responsiveness and information sharing from the ground that gave the Egyptian revolution the byname “Twitter Revolution,” we can witness the establishment of news channels sustaining a regular output of information thus complementing the media landscapes. The outputs of such channels inform their followers and provide a tool to challenge mainstream media narratives. The Lebanese collective Megaphone is exemplary of this development by posting regularly on their Social Media accounts since 2017.

In my master’s thesis, I would like to take a closer look at the medium, their platform and the collective’s form of journalistic production. In doing so, I want to know how Megaphone challenges the rigid system of media production in Lebanon and counters the hegemony of bigger media outlets. I argue that Megaphone adds an alternative to the media landscape with potential to grow and to extend their influence in Lebanon, among the Lebanese diaspora and beyond. The thesis takes Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as a starting point to explore the setting of power which the medium operates in and is tied into. In this way, I look into the extent to which the collective around Megaphone challenges the hegemonic dominance of the big media houses in Lebanon. I am convinced that it is enriching to understand the media landscape as a place where hegemony is exercised in order to identify larger power structures that make independent reporting in Lebanon more difficult. To understand media as one sphere where hegemony can be exercised in society, is to understand the power relations that shape our everyday lives.

On this basis, I would like to explore later on my assumption that a repurposing of social media is taking place that challenges and questions established power relations of media production. I would like to explore if social media remains a factor that influences social balances and can thus be understood as a tool for political participation. Although social

¹ I prefer to use the term West Asia and North Africa to challenge the common use of other terms such as “Middle East” that reveals a Eurocentric perspective on the world which finds its roots in colonial ambitions of European countries during the 19th and 20th century. See Miladi, Nouredine; Mellor, Noha (eds.) (2021). *Routledge handbook on Arab media*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 1.

media remains largely a virtual space, it continues to be a sphere that can bring about change and holds the potential for social upheaval ten years after the so-called Arab Spring.² Due to the fast pace of social media, the trends, and the use of it, it is all the more interesting to use an example of a long-term project as a research subject. The analysis in my master's thesis adds to a longer debate in the social sciences on the impact of social media during uprisings, on the process of democratization, and the participation in politics. I chose a multi-method approach consisting of field research, interviews, and qualitative text analysis of Megaphone's output to trace the practices of counter-hegemony within their work and to locate the medium within the Lebanese media landscape.

The thesis' introduction follows a chapter about the methodology and the methods that were applied in order to produce the results of this work. The description of the methodology is accompanied by an overview about the current state of debate to give an overview about recent academia on the topics of social media, activism, and journalism in the Arab world. The third chapter is going to give the reader an overview about the context in which the medium operates. The chapter consists of a short summary of recent Lebanese history and politics as well as an introductory discussion of the Lebanese media landscape. Another aspect to add to the context is a section defining social media as space of operation for Megaphone. In the fourth chapter, the work of Gramsci and his concept of hegemony is going to be introduced on a theoretical level. Afterwards, I demonstrate how the Lebanese media industry is affiliated to the political factions which classifies the media industry as a hegemonic tool of it. As a direct response, I present the different counter-hegemonic aspects in Megaphone's work in chapter five. The chapter touches upon a variety of aspects of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, such as common sense, organic intellectuals, and the subaltern as I see them present in Megaphone's philosophy and work. Chapter six turns to discuss the subject of revolution on two levels: on the actual level about the October revolution in Lebanon, and on the theoretical level in consideration of Gramsci's aspect of passive revolution. Additionally, I elaborate on the question if counter-hegemony stabilizes the hegemony of the Lebanese elite. Afterwards, I turn to present my findings about social media as a platform that drives change while talking about the potential as well as the limits of social media. In addition, I assess if Megaphone's activities qualify as alternative journalism as a necessary step to locate it within the Lebanese media landscape. This is

² Western media subsumed these protest movements under the name of "Arab spring" which is misleading because each movement had its own motives, motivations, and outcomes. More criticism about the term and its implications can be found in Gerlach, Daniel; Behrendt, Moritz; Chatterjee, Robert (eds.) (2016). *Atlas des Arabischen Frühlings: Eine Weltregion im Umbruch*. Zeitbilder. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

followed by my analysis of discursive spaces on social media and how Megaphone invigorates them. I close the chapter with an outlook on Megaphone and its future in the Lebanese media landscape. The last chapter concludes the findings of my research and analysis of Megaphone, counter-hegemony, and social media as a driver for change.

Various resources inform my work. At the core of the analysis, I pose Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* published in Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's *Selection of the Prison Notebooks from Antonio Gramsci*.³ The two editors assembled the most important passages from the *Prison Notebooks* and published them along with their introductory words on the terms Gramsci developed during his time in prison and how he used them in relation to his theory of cultural hegemony. Therefore, the passages from the *Prison Notebooks* are cited with the names of Hoare and Nowell Smith in the footnotes, meaning the translation of Gramsci; in case, a remark from the editors is cited it is made clear in the text. Furthermore, the contribution of Rinella Cere on *Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in Postcolonial Media Theory and Culture*⁴ proved to be very helpful as well as Savaş Çoban's book *Media, ideology and hegemony*.⁵ Regarding Lebanon and its media industry Sarah El-Richani's contribution on Lebanon in the *Routledge handbook on Arab media*⁶ proved to be very informative. When I turn to discuss social media in the later section, the contributions by Joss Hands, Chris Atton, James Frederick Hamilton, Linda Jean Kenix, Gwen Bouvier and Le Cheng and numerous other authors were valuable to build on.

The empirical material provides interesting insights into the workings of the Lebanese media landscape from an actor's point of view. Meanwhile, Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is employed to explain certain societal structures of power and at the same time serves as a basis to explain the counter-hegemonic activities in the Lebanese media landscape. It implies a certain selectivity of Gramsci's theoretical aspects; however, a full assessment would extend the scope of this work. Also, the objective of my analysis is to conceptualize the work of a social media-based medium within a larger context of power mechanisms. Part of the analysis

³ Hoare, Quentin; Nowell Smith, Geoffrey (1999). *Selections of the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. EB, vol. 0006. London, UK: ElecBook, The Electric Book Co.

⁴ Cere, Rinella (2016). Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in Postcolonial Media Theory and Culture. In: Kai Merten and Lucia Krämer (eds.). *Postcolonial Studies Meets Media Studies*, pp. 125–142. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

⁵ Çoban, Savaş (ed.) (2018). *Media, ideology and hegemony*. Studies in critical social sciences, volume 122. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

⁶ El-Richani, Sarah (2021). Whither the Lebanese Press? The trials and tribulations facing the Lebanese print media. In: Nouredine Miladi and Noha Mellor (eds.). *Routledge handbook on Arab media*, pp. 167–178. London, New York: Routledge.

is the indirect question of Gramsci's applicability to the empirical material. The mere application of his theory would limit the analysis with its rigidity. At the same time, I am aware of the pitfalls that might occur when working with Gramsci as a theoretical basis. It could run the risk of picking the cherries of Gramsci's theory and to avoid a broader consideration of his thoughts that are intertwined and cannot be understood isolated from one another. Brecht De Smet preconceived the same issue in the introduction of his book *Gramsci on Tahrir*:

I admit that this approach runs the risk of turning into what Hal Draper (2011a: 21) called 'quotation-mongering' and Roccu (2012: 20) 'a *prêt à- porter* version of Gramsci': using decontextualized fragments of the *Prison Notebooks* as sources of authority to 'prove' one's own point. However, such fragments can also be deployed in a less apologetic and a more dialogical way, as conceptual threads that weave together a new narrative, which engages with problems relevant to our time and place.⁷

It is in the dialogical way that I see the strength of my work. My choice to analyse the Lebanese media landscape from the inner perspective enables me to stimulate the dialogical potential of the empirical material with the help of the theoretical background. Although Gramsci died a long time ago, his thoughts are still relevant and applicable today. It would be a loss to limit his theoretical considerations to the realm of 20th century European societies. This leads me to discuss another pitfall that is the application of the theory of a European thinker to a non-European context such as Lebanon. I would like to hold against this argument that Gramsci's considerations of power and the structure of society are quite abstract in their nature because they refer to a world run by a capitalist ideology, a market logic that Lebanon has been integrated into for a long time already. De Smet confirms my point: "instead of belonging to a culturalist category of reified 'Western' thought, Gramsci's concepts operate as subaltern weapons of emancipation from capital, which have to be *translated* to different struggles."⁸ I understand my work as a translation of Gramsci's concept to a new context, the media landscape in Lebanon. Therefore, an analysis inspired by Gramsci can help to understand social media, power hierarchies, and an alternative approach to news production in a novel way.

⁷ de Smet, Brecht (2016). *Gramsci on Tahrir*. London: Pluto Press, p. 3 (emphasis in the original).

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 8 (emphasis in the original).

2 Methodology and literature

I turn now to outline the proceeding of my research in order to obtain the empirical material. Although this thesis is rooted in Arabic studies, I employ anthropological techniques due to their qualitative features. Also, I see links to critical media studies because my material corresponds to its literature as will be shown in the subsequent chapters. Since no empirical material is entirely objective, I take this opportunity to reflect upon my positionality in the field and as a researcher.

2.1 Field research and material

The approach to my research question is based on a mix of methods. First and foremost, a good share of my empirical material is based on interviews that I conducted during a field trip to Beirut, Lebanon, in February 2022. Previous engagement with young Lebanese, political activists from 2017 on, enabled me to establish contacts to activists in Lebanon which resulted in two interviews with members from Megaphone—one with the managing director, and one with the creative and production director of the group. Both are also co-founders and gave me invaluable insights into the workings of the media outlet. Additionally, I was interested in other people's perspectives on social media and activism. As a result, I interviewed four more people with diverse backgrounds: two activists that founded the political party Minteshreen after the October revolution in 2019, a social media analyst, and a founding member of the You Stink movement in 2015. All interviews were conducted as topic-centred, semi-narrative interviews. I identified guiding questions prior to each interview and let the interviewees speak freely to identify what they consider important.⁹ Each interview was preceded by a brief introduction to explain my research aim, the purpose of the interview and to ask for consent to record the conversation; all interviews were recorded but the one with the social media analyst. Directly after or in close proximity to the interviews, I took notes of the circumstances, my impressions, and other remarks which resulted in six protocols of the interviews.

In addition to the interviews, I examined the social media channels of Megaphone over the course of February. I saved the Instagram posts in an Excel sheet and classified them with categories corresponding to aspects of Gramsci's hegemony theory. The medium shares very

⁹ cf. Schlehe, Judith (2020). Qualitative ethnographische Interviews. In: Anika König (ed.). *Methoden ethnologischer Feldforschung*. Ethnologische Paperbacks, 3rd edn., pp. 91–112. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, p. 97.

similar content on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter while adapting the posts to the particularities of the platform. For my analysis, I chose Instagram because the layout and overall appearance proved to be the best output of the medium for documentation than other social media channels. Another aspect of the analysis of their online presence was the examination of their website to complement the information from interviews and the social media content. In this thesis, I quote a few Instagram posts from Megaphone's Instagram page and insert the direct link to the posts in the respective footnotes with the last date of access. All Instagram posts from the research period have been saved as screenshots by the author and are available upon request. The bibliography will only give credit to Megaphone's Instagram channel.

During my field trip, the previously accumulated knowledge about the context and the history of Lebanon helped me to understand the field in which I was operating in. Georg Breidenstein et al. label this kind of knowledge "Erfahrungswissen" (empirical knowledge).¹⁰ The empirical knowledge had the advantage that I knew the object of study and could already classify it in the field. This should prove helpful during the interviews, but also in understanding the motivation and socio-political context of the interviewees. However, a reflection of my collected material should include the realization that it results from my personal selection and reflects my analytical orientations.

After my field trip followed a period of analysis with geographical distance to the field. During this period, I put my gathered material in order and organized the next steps.¹¹ It resulted in what is my text corpus which eventually consists of the following data: written notes (field notes, analytical notes, protocols of the interviews, the transcription of the interviews), audio records (interview recordings and taped conversations), and other written documentation (among which I count the material from the social media account Instagram).¹² However, research in the field cannot be strictly divided into the phase of data collection and the phase of subsequent analysis.¹³ I already began analysing the material during the research stay, which certainly influenced the course of the research. Also, my position and education as a *white* student of Arabic Studies and Cultural Anthropology at a European university in a

¹⁰ Breidenstein, Georg; Hirschauer, Stefan; Kalthoff, Herbert; Nieswand, Boris (2015). *Ethnografie: Die Praxis der Feldforschung*. utb-studi-e-book, vol. 3979, 2nd edn. Konstanz, München: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH; UVK/Lucius, p. 115.

¹¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹² cf. *ibid.*, p. 115.

¹³ cf. *ibid.*, p. 109.

Eurocentric tradition cannot be completely cancelled out, despite reflection on this positionality which may have also shaped my research and my findings.¹⁴

2.2 Current state of debate

The digital realm and social networks have been subject to a lot of research over the past decades. A general overview about scholarship, history, and definitions are provided by Thomas Aichner et al.'s article *Twenty-Five Years of Social Media: A Review of Social Media Applications and Definitions from 1994 to 2019*¹⁵ as well as danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison's *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship*.¹⁶ Social media is also subject to scholarship with the question of news production and consumption. With regard to the regional focus on Lebanon in this thesis and thus of the Arabic-speaking world, Dale F. Eickelman's contribution *New media in the Muslim world: The emerging public sphere*¹⁷ should be mentioned as one of the first works to include the internet as part of the Arabic media sphere in general. Already in 2010, Kristen Purcell et al. noticed the shift in news consumption from traditional media to social media and the participatory possibilities that come with it as a social experience.¹⁸ Annika Bergström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage focus on another aspect and argue for incidental news consumption and opinion-making influenced by opinion leaders.¹⁹ Politics are an omnipresent aspect of news consumption on social media and hold the potential to influence the political balance in a country. Leticia Bode fills the gap in scholarship about social media as a source for political information²⁰ while Augusto Valeriani and Christian Vaccari fathom the impact of accidental exposure to politics on online

¹⁴ The word *white* not only denotes skin colour, but also refers to the socialisation in a white majority society and the privileges that this entails. *White* is thus a constructed category, whereby, at this point, the use is intended to express the political and social scope of what is meant by the deliberate, italicised spelling.

¹⁵ Aichner, Thomas; Grünfelder, Matthias; Maurer, Oswin; Jegeni, Deni (2021). *Twenty-Five Years of Social Media: A Review of Social Media Applications and Definitions from 1994 to 2019*. *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking* 24 (4): 215–222. 10.1089/cyber.2020.0134.

¹⁶ boyd, danah m; Ellison, Nicole B. (2007). *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship*. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1): 210–230. 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x.

¹⁷ Eickelman, Dale F. (ed.) (1999). *New media in the Muslim world: The emerging public sphere*. Indiana series in Middle East studies. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press.

¹⁸ Purcell, Kristen; Rainie, Lee; Mitchell, Amy; Rosenstiel, Tom; Olmstead, Kenneth (2010). *Understanding the participatory news consumer: How internet and cell phone users have turned news into a social experience*. Pew Research Center.

¹⁹ Bergström, Annika; Jervelycke Belfrage, Maria (2018). *News in Social Media*. *Digital Journalism* 6 (5): 583–598. 10.1080/21670811.2018.1423625.

²⁰ Bode, Leticia (2016). *Political News in the News Feed: Learning Politics from Social Media*. *Mass Communication and Society* 19 (1): 24–48. 10.1080/15205436.2015.1045149.

participation in three European countries.²¹ Most recently, Qiuxia Tian published an article about news filtering and news avoidance in light of the plethora of news provided on social media and how users mediate the need for news with media literacy.²²

Social movements on social media count among the topics of interest as well and are covered by various authors. Although over ten years old, John D. H. Downing's *Encyclopedia of social movement media*²³ covers a variety of social movements and their presence in the diverse forms of media such as cinema, feminist media, human right's media or simply the internet as a space for social movements. Victor Pickard and Guobin Yang's edition about *Media Activism in the Digital Age*²⁴ offers an insight into the evolution of media activism studies by assembling a selection of essays by scholars in the field.

Dhiraj Murthy, more specifically, covers Twitter as a platform for communication and activism.²⁵ He has published several sociological works on Twitter so far, always with a particular focus on the aspect of communication on social media as a tool to organization and activism.²⁶ It is nothing new that protests are nowadays largely organized online. Adrian U. Ang et al. explore "the means, motives, and opportunities of anti-government demonstrations"²⁷ that are organized by digital natives while Bouvier and Cheng explore potential of Twitter for political activism.²⁸ Paolo Gerbaudo adds another work to the extensive literature on social media and activism which circles around the question of leadership and the tension between online and offline activism.²⁹ Hand's focus within the

²¹ Valeriani, Augusto; Vaccari, Cristian (2016). Accidental exposure to politics on social media as online participation equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. *New Media & Society* 18 (9): 1857–1874. 10.1177/1461444815616223.

²² Tian, Qiuxia (2022). Impact of Social Media News Overload on Social Media News Avoidance and Filtering: Moderating Effect of Media Literacy. *Frontiers in psychology* 13: 1–15. 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.862626.

²³ Downing, John Derek Hall (ed.) (2011). *Encyclopedia of social movement media*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.

²⁴ Pickard, Victor; Yang, Guobin (eds.) (2017). *Media Activism in the Digital Age*. London, New York: Routledge.

²⁵ Murthy, Dhiraj (2018). *Twitter: Social communication in the twitter age*. Digital media and society series. Cambridge, UK, Medford, MA: Polity.

²⁶ Murthy, Dhiraj (2018). Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations. *Social Media + Society* 4 (1): 205630511775071. 10.1177/2056305117750716.

²⁷ Ang, Adrian U; Dinar, Shlomi; Lucas, Russell E. (2014). Protests by the young and digitally restless: the means, motives, and opportunities of anti-government demonstrations. *Information, Communication & Society* 17 (10): 1228–1249. 10.1080/1369118X.2014.918635.

²⁸ Chilwa, Innocent; Bouvier, Gwen (eds.) (2019). *Activism, campaigning and political discourse on Twitter*. Media and communications Technologies, policies and challenges. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

²⁹ Gerbaudo, Paolo (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London: Pluto Press.

broader debate lies on dissent and resistance in the digital culture and its positive outcomes.³⁰ The wider analysis of social media, activism, and protest is complemented by different articles with a more regional focus and their specific contexts. Tanja Bosch conducted research about the student movement *Rhodes Must Fall* in South Africa and their activism on Twitter which countered the memory and institutionalization of mainstream colonial narratives.³¹ Summer Harlow depicts, in the case of a Guatemalan justice movement, how social media-based activism moved offline and incited change.³² Akintola Olaniyan and Ufuoma Akpojivi explore the use of social media and its impact on democratic structures in Nigeria using Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere.³³ Contrary to the positive outlooks on social media and its role for activism, there are also more critical voices to find in literature. Sarah Joseph retraces the role of social media during the so-called Arab Spring and argues—against the popular opinion—for an alternative view on social media as a tool of oppression rather than emancipation.³⁴ However, the majority of literature about the different uprisings in the Arabic-speaking world in 2011 depicts the intersection of social media and protests positively. Gadi Wolfsfeld et al. take the protests in the Arab-speaking world as a starting point to examine the role of social media in protests more generally. Two principles derive from their analysis: First, the political and social environment of protests must be considered in order to understand the role of social media in collective action; and second, a rise in social media activity usually follows (offline) protests and collective action, thus opposing the idea that it precedes it.³⁵ Another contribution that takes into account a number of case studies is the book by Reza Jamali *Online Arab spring: Social media and fundamental change*³⁶ in which the author asks about the role of social media during the protests. In a similarly comparative approach, Nezar AlSayyad and Munahave Guvenc explore the reciprocity of the uprisings online on social media and offline in urban spaces in three case

³⁰ Hands, Joss (2011). *@ is for activism: Dissent, resistance and rebellion in a digital culture*. London, New York, NY: Pluto.

³¹ Bosch, Tanja (2017). Twitter activism and youth in South Africa: the case of #RhodesMustFall. *Information, Communication & Society* 20 (2): 221–232. 10.1080/1369118X.2016.1162829.

³² Harlow, Summer (2012). Social media and social movements: Facebook and an online Guatemalan justice movement that moved offline. *New Media & Society* 14 (2): 225–243. 10.1177/1461444811410408.

³³ Olaniyan, Akintola; Akpojivi, Ufuoma (2021). Transforming communication, social media, counter-hegemony and the struggle for the soul of Nigeria. *Information, Communication & Society* 24 (3): 422–437. 10.1080/1369118X.2020.1804983.

³⁴ Joseph, Sarah (2011). Social Media, Human Rights and Political Change. *SSRN Journal*. 10.2139/ssrn.1856880.

³⁵ Wolfsfeld, Gadi; Segev, Elad; Sheaffer, Tamir (2013). Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18 (2): 115–137. 10.1177/1940161212471716.

³⁶ Jamali, Reza (2015). *Online Arab spring: Social media and fundamental change*. Chandos social media series. Waltham, MA: Chandos Publishing.

studies from Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen.³⁷ For the specific case of Morocco's February 20 movement, Abdelaziz Radi assesses the potential of social media as a game changer for the young generation that does not feel represented in state institutions and by political parties.³⁸ In *Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square*,³⁹ the authors Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson observe that participation in demonstrations at Tahrir Square in Cairo was facilitated by interpersonal communications through social media such as Facebook. A more critical analysis of English and Arabic Twitter activity during the uprisings in Egypt and Libya in 2011 and the subsequent war of the latter is provided by Axel Bruns et al.⁴⁰ As an outcome of the protests and the evolution of communication and news dissemination on social media, citizen journalism is explored as an opportunity to challenge mainstream media authorities and media laws taking the example of Egypt by Naila Hamdy.⁴¹

This section gave an overview about the extensive literature on the different subjects that I tie together in this thesis, namely social media and its role in protests, news production, and news consumption on social media, all with a focus on the WANA-region. The majority of the works contribute to the development of the argument in this analysis and will emerge in the following chapters. After this contextual literature review, the next chapter is going to introduce the reader to the context of the case study: Lebanon, its history, and its media landscape.

3 Context of the case study: Lebanon, media, and social media

As a first step to introduce the reader to the context of this thesis, I give a brief overview about the history of Lebanon in this section. The analysis of a specific context should always

³⁷ AlSayyad, Nezar; Guvenc, Muna (2015). Virtual Uprisings: On the Interaction of New Social Media, Traditional Media Coverage and Urban Space during the 'Arab Spring'. *Urban Studies* 52 (11): 2018–2034. 10.1177/0042098013505881.

³⁸ Radi, Abdelaziz (2017). Protest Movements and Social Media: Morocco's February 20 Movement. *Africa development* 42 (2): 31–55.

³⁹ Tufekci, Zeynep; Wilson, Christopher (2012). Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication* 62 (2): 363–379. 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01629.x.

⁴⁰ Bruns, Axel; Highfield, Tim; Burgess, Jean (2013). The Arab Spring and Social Media Audiences: English and Arabic Twitter Users and Their Networks. *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (7): 871–898. 10.1177/0002764213479374.

⁴¹ Hamdy, Naila (2015). Arab Citizen Journalism in Action: Challenging Mainstream Media, Authorities and Media Laws. *WPCC* 6 (1): 92. 10.16997/wpcc.110.

include the history in order to understand the historical dynamics that have an impact until nowadays, as well as the set of players that are currently in power.⁴² Afterwards, I turn to outline the media sector in Lebanon and its ties to the political class to pave the way for the introduction of hegemony within the Lebanese media landscape in the subsequent chapters.

3.1 Recent history and politics of Lebanon

The region that makes up the geographical area of Lebanon today was part of the Ottoman empire from the 16th century until after World War I. However, its beginnings as a political entity are already rooted back to when the Emirate of Mount Lebanon constituted “an autonomous region inside the Ottoman Empire.”⁴³ In the beginning of the 20th century, intellectual movements helped to create a consciousness of the nation state that fuelled national independence movements in the Arab world as well as in Lebanon.⁴⁴ Yet, Lebanese independence was still some 40 years away.

The domination of the Ottoman Empire ceased at the end of World War I when the former Ottoman provinces were newly distributed among the victorious parties, namely Great Britain and France. The Sykes-Picot Accords that dated back to 1916 “divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire into two broadly defined British and French zones.”⁴⁵ The sovereignty of the new Lebanon was handed over to France and Lebanon continued to exist as a French mandate.

It was the Second World War (1939 – 1945) that would bring independence due to the weakening of the French State that was partly under German occupation at that time. The morning of the November 22, 1943, the end of the French mandate in Lebanon was declared,⁴⁶ and in the following months a unique system of governance was implemented which is in place until today:

the National Pact Agreement further institutionalized a confessional representation system, stipulating the following roles, which are still in place today: a Christian

⁴² cf. Fawcett, Louise (2019). *International Relations of the Middle East*: Oxford University Press, p. 16.

⁴³ Ṭarābulusī, Fauwāz (2012). *A history of modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press, p. 3.

⁴⁴ cf. Schulze, Reinhard (2003). *Geschichte der Islamischen Welt im 20. Jahrhundert*, 2nd edn. München: Beck, p. 79.

⁴⁵ Ṭarābulusī (2012), p. 75.

⁴⁶ cf. *ibid.*, p. 108.

Maronite as President, a Muslim Sunni as Prime Minister, a Muslim Shia as speaker of Parliament, and a 6:5 Christian to Muslim ratio of parliamentary representatives.⁴⁷

In the 1950s Lebanon experienced relative economic prosperity although the social order was always overshadowed by tensions among the different sectarian groups.⁴⁸ They amounted to armed conflicts that resulted in the first Lebanese war lasting from 1975 – 1977.⁴⁹ Syria took advantage of the situation and stationed its own troops in Lebanon in 1976.⁵⁰ Although the first wave of war calmed down after two years of conflict, tensions pervaded up until the next war in 1982.⁵¹ The Christian allied forces in Lebanon wanted to take advantage of the Israeli government's plan to invade Southern Lebanon in order to maintain and even expand their power.⁵² With the Christian backing, the Israeli Defence Forces invaded Lebanon in summer 1982, and occupied at one point one third of the country.⁵³ After long years of a disastrous war, the United States and Saudi Arabia manufactured an agreement to end the fighting between the different parties. In late 1989, the remaining Lebanese parliamentarians came together in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, and ratified the agreement to end the civil war.⁵⁴

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005 caused a lot of protests that demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.⁵⁵ The protest movement amounted to a revolution, called the Cedar Revolution, and succeeded with its demands to gain more independence from Syria when the Syrian troops finally withdrew from Lebanese territory in 2005.⁵⁶ In the following months, tensions along the Southern border with Israel continued and occasional conflicts culminated in a war between the Shiite party Hezbollah⁵⁷ and Israel in summer 2006.⁵⁸

⁴⁷ Badaan, Vivienne; Richa, Rudy; Jost, John T. (2020). Ideological justification of the sectarian political system in Lebanon. *Current opinion in psychology* 32: 138–145. 10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.07.033, p. 139.

⁴⁸ cf. Ṭarābulusī (2012), p. 129.

⁴⁹ cf. Schulze (2003), p. 269.

⁵⁰ cf. Ṭarābulusī (2012), pp. 204–205.

⁵¹ cf. Harris, William W. (2012). *Lebanon: A history, 600-2011*. Studies in Middle Eastern history. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 240.

⁵² cf. Ṭarābulusī (2012), p. 218.

⁵³ cf. Harris (2012), p. 244.

⁵⁴ cf. Ṭarābulusī (2012), p. 246.

⁵⁵ cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 168.

⁵⁶ cf. Comaty, Lyna (2019). *Post-conflict transition in Lebanon: The disappeared of the civil war*. Routledge studies in Middle Eastern society, vol. 5. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Most of the Arabic names are written in their popular form in this work. I use the transliteration of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG) in a few cases when the name of a newspaper, for instance, is originally written in Arabic.

⁵⁸ Harris (2012), p. 271.

When a wave of protests broke out in various countries all over the WANA-region in 2011 that even led to the ousting of some Arab leaders, Lebanon remained relatively calm. A bigger movement to take to the streets formed in 2015 when the government failed to collect the garbage for weeks, the You Stink movement. But it was not until October 2019 that a bigger protest movement claimed its space on the streets. The protests were sparked by a new cabinet-approved tax on internet-based phone calls on mobile applications such as WhatsApp;⁵⁹ however, “each social movement is the product of its context.”⁶⁰ The October revolution was an outcome of a culmination of structural circumstances, such as notorious neglect, cases of corruption within the political and economic elite, and political mismanagement. Protesters gathered in all major cities such as Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, Tyre, and Baalbek. Although the Prime Minister Saad Hariri and other members of the government resigned, the political and economic struggles became soon evident when the banks closed for 14 days “triggering a currency crisis and uncontrolled bank rush, followed by an unofficial capital control and a hidden haircut on deposits.”⁶¹ As a consequence, the currency lost most of its value and the majority of the population became subject to poverty, according to official numbers.⁶² In addition to the economic turmoil, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the beginning of 2020 affected the country and exacerbated the everyday life of the people with lockdowns and strong restrictions of social interactions. In the midst of these challenging times, the explosion of approximately 2.000 tons of ammonium nitrate in the port area of Beirut on August 4, 2020, caused 207 deaths, injured thousands of people and destroyed many homes adjacent to the port area.⁶³ The Lebanese population continues to struggle due to the ongoing crises: financial, economic, and political.

Lebanon’s political structure is a direct result from its 20th century historical events and the religious diversity the country is comprised of. The numerous religious sects make it

one of the most religiously diverse countries in the Middle East, with 18 officially recognized religious groups, including 4 Muslim groups and 12 Christian groups plus Jewish people and the Druze.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ cf. Khater, Lea Bou (2021). Lebanon’s October 2019 Revolution. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120 (2): 464–472. 10.1215/00382876-8916218, p. 464.

⁶⁰ Radi (2017), p. 42.

⁶¹ Khater (2021), p. 464.

⁶² cf. United Nations (2022). *Lebanon: Almost three-quarters of the population living in poverty*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099102>, last accessed June 7, 2022.

⁶³ cf. Nassar, Chirine Khalil; Nastacă, Corina-Cristiana (2021). The Beirut Port Explosion: Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management. *Theoretical and empirical researches in urban management* 16 (3): 42–52, p. 42.

⁶⁴ Badaan, Richa and Jost (2020), p. 139.

The religious variety directly translates to the political field and many sects are represented by political parties. In addition, Lebanese politics are shaped by a network of alliances between the various groups and parties, thus turning the political arena quite complex.

Since 2005, and as a consequence of the Cedar revolution, two political alliances have dominated the field. The main demand of the protesters during the Cedar revolution was the withdrawal of the Syrian troops and the reduction of Syria's influence in Lebanese politics. Therefore, roughly speaking, the two alliances are split between the pro-Syrian faction, March 8 alliance, and the anti-Syrian faction, March 14 alliance. The March 14 alliance is composed of the Future Movement (formerly led by Saad al-Hariri and largely Sunni), the Lebanese Forces (led by Samir Geagea and largely Christian), the Kataeb Party (led by Samy Gemayel and largely Christian), and other smaller parties. Walid Jumblatt's largely Druze Progressive Socialist Party is allied to the March 14 alliance. In opposition to it, there is the March 8 alliance which is comprised of Hezbollah (led by Hassan Nasrallah and largely Shiite), the Amal Movement (led by Nabih Berri and largely Shiite), the Free Patriotic Movement (led by Michel Aoun and largely Christian), the Marada Movement (led by Suleiman Frangieh Jr. and largely Christian), and other smaller parties. The Lebanese Communist Party and the Free Patriotic Movement, which is largely Christian and headed by Gebran Bassil, are both allies to the March 8 alliance.⁶⁵ However, this simplified classification can shift under changing political circumstances and strategic alliances are negotiable from topic to topic.

The political landscape slightly changed after the elections in May 2022. Saad Hariri called for a boycott prior to the elections and announced his withdrawal from political affairs, leaving a vacuum in the Sunni political sphere.⁶⁶ Although Hezbollah did not lose any seats, its allies did. Two influential and long-held seats in the South went to opposition candidates. By that, Hezbollah's alliance lost its parliamentary majority. Changes in the fragile political balance can cause governmental paralysis for months and leave the country in a political deadlock.⁶⁷ The long-term effects of the elections should be evaluated at a later point.

⁶⁵ cf. Al Sharq Strategic Research (July 10, 2020). *Alliances in Lebanese Politics (2005 – 2020)*. <https://research.sharqforum.org/2020/07/10/alliances-in-lebanese-politics-2005-2020/>, last accessed June 17, 2022.

⁶⁶ cf. Homsy, Nada (June 13, 2022). Lebanon's Sunni leadership void could derail naming of Prime Minister. *The National*. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/06/13/lebanons-sunni-leadership-void-could-derail-naming-of-prime-minister/>, last accessed June 17, 2022.

⁶⁷ cf. Chehayeb, Kareem (May 19, 2022). Elections in Lebanon, does political change stand a chance? *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/19/what-stands-next-for-lebanon-after-key-elections>, last accessed June 17, 2022.

3.2 The Lebanese media landscape

After a short introduction to the history and politics of Lebanon, I turn now toward an overview about the Lebanese media landscape. I outline my definition of traditional or mainstream media that is used throughout this thesis and that is synchronized with Megaphone's usage of "the media" in Lebanon during the interviews. Afterwards, I present the becoming of the Lebanese media of what it is today and its affiliation to the Lebanese political parties and factions.

Kenix's definition of mainstream media in her book about the converging spectrum of different forms of media production seems to be well suited for this thesis:

they are situated completely within (and concomitantly co-creating) the ideological norms of society, enjoy a widespread scale of influence, rely on professionalized reporters and are heavily connected with other corporate and governmental entities.⁶⁸

The definition allows one to understand the media as an active part of the political society in a specific context and foreshadows the influence of the media in the hegemonic undertaking of an elite that is subject to this thesis in later chapters. However, the definition runs the risk of being too unspecific. Nick Couldry makes a valid point in this case:

[It] is open to the objection that the authority of different media (television versus radio, the press, music, film, video, and so on) varies significantly. My basic argument, however, is that many common-sense assumptions about the media's authority operate with a sense of 'the media' which is highly non-specific.⁶⁹

It aligns with the vague parlance by my interview partners from Megaphone who either spoke of the media, TV, radio, and sometimes newspapers as the media.⁷⁰ A closer look at the Lebanese media landscape might help to clarify its boundaries.

The beginnings of the Lebanese press can be traced back to the first copy of a newspaper called *Ḥadīqat al-Aḥbār* that was published in Beirut in 1858.⁷¹ The media landscape was continuously populated from there on until it reached the number of "168 publications, including political dailies, weeklies, magazines, and scholarly journals"⁷² before the outbreak

⁶⁸ Kenix, Linda Jean (2011). *Alternative and mainstream media: the converging spectrum*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Couldry, Nick (2000). *The place of media power: Pilgrims and witnesses of the media age*. Comedia. London, New York: Routledge, p. 12 (emphasis in the original).

⁷⁰ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

⁷¹ cf. Dajani, Nabil (1992). *Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience*. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, p. 22.

⁷² Traboulsi (2007) cited in El-Richani (2021), p. 168.

of World War I in 1914. This was despite a tighter control of the press law under the French mandate that limited the freedom of the press and free speech in general.⁷³

After Lebanon achieved its independence in 1943, the country enjoyed relative freedom and the media industry flourished.⁷⁴ It was during the years of the civil war that lasted from 1975 until 1990 that the media landscape changed and saw the emergence of

strident and hateful militia tabloids alongside newspapers representing the entire political spectrum with the support of local, regional, and international forces from Libya and Egypt to Saudi Arabia, the USSR, and the United States.⁷⁵

During the Lebanese civil war, some radio stations tried to maintain neutrality although the majority of them were owned and directed by sectarian influences. Licensed radio stations were complemented by partisan radios that reflected the fragmented sectarian local groups.⁷⁶

The media landscape experienced relative freedoms in the 2000s even though the assassination of two journalists with anti-Syrian stances in 2005 overshadowed the media industry.⁷⁷ With the rise of social media and digital tools, they slowly became an instrument for news dissemination. Nowadays, social media is an integral part of our daily lives which entails the consumption of news, too.⁷⁸ In Lebanon, “Facebook and WhatsApp are the most used social media channels in Lebanon, followed by Twitter and Instagram.”⁷⁹ Murthy comments on social media: “The ‘social’ part of social media refers to its distinction from ‘traditional’ media,”⁸⁰ an aspect that I emphasize in this thesis. In the following chapters when I talk about media hegemony, I refer to the non-social media institutions in opposition to social media because it supports the distinction that Megaphone brought up in their interviews and that define their act of self-location in the Lebanese media landscape.

Although many media freedoms are guaranteed in Lebanon by law, the practical implementation reveals certain limitations. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression

⁷³ cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 168.

⁷⁴ cf. Ayalon, Ami (1995). *The press in the Arab Middle East: A history*. Studies in Middle Eastern history. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 91.

⁷⁵ El-Richani (2021), p. 168.

⁷⁶ cf. Khazaal, Natalie (2021). Lebanese Broadcasting: Small country, influential media. In: Nouredine Miladi and Noha Mellor (eds.). *Routledge handbook on Arab media*, pp. 179–190. London, New York: Routledge, p. 180.

⁷⁷ cf. El-Richani (2021), pp. 168–169.

⁷⁸ cf. Tian (2022), p. 1. All my interview partners confirmed this information as well as information from informal talks during my field trip.

⁷⁹ Media Landscapes (2022). *Lebanon: Social Networks*. <https://medialandscapes.org/country/lebanon/>, last accessed June 15, 2022.

⁸⁰ Murthy, Dhiraj (2012). Towards a Sociological Understanding of Social Media: Theorizing Twitter. *Sociology* 46 (6): 1059–1073. 10.1177/0038038511422553, p. 1061.

are generally guaranteed in Article 13 of the constitution from 1943 and the regulations of the International Covenant of Civil and Political rights that are ratified by the Lebanese government. However, the exact wording in Article 13 (“within the limits of the law”) suggests some flexibility of it and gives space to arbitrary interpretations and limitations of expression exercised by Lebanese courts. This is further exacerbated by the Lebanese penal code as well as the media and press laws in place. For instance, it is forbidden by the penal code’s Article 384 to insult the president. Also, the criminal code acts strictly in cases of defamation and the dissemination of false information as crimes with consequences accordingly. However, the definitions of these subjects are very broad and give space to interpretations.⁸¹

<i>Name</i>	<i>Newspaper affiliation</i>	<i>Status</i>
1 <i>Ad-Diyar</i>	Syrian Nationalist Charles Ayoub (1988)	Founded 1944
2 <i>Al-Anba'</i>	Partisan weekly, Progressive Socialist Party	Founded 1951 by Kamal Jumblatt Converged 2012
3 <i>Al-Akhbar</i>	Hezbollah, Leftist, Aounists	Founded 2006 <i>Al-Akhbar</i> English folded 2015
4 <i>Al-Balad</i>	Al-Wataniya	Founded 2003 Folded 2018
5 <i>Al-Bina'</i>	Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party	Founded in 1958
6 <i>Al-Jumhuriyya</i>	Former Minister of Defense Elias Murr March 14	Relaunched in 2011
7 <i>Al-Liwa'</i>	Salam Family, close to Hariri and the Gulf states	Founded 1963
8 <i>Al-Mustakbal</i>	Future Movement (Hariri)	Founded 1999 Converged 2018
9 <i>An-Nahar</i>	Liberal, Tuani Family, Hariri family and associates, Issam Fares, other shareholders	Founded 1933
10 <i>As-Safir</i>	Leftist, pan-Arab Talal Salman and family Jamal Daniel (2014)	Founded in 1974 by Talal Salman Folded 2016
11 <i>El-Sharq</i>	Awni al-Kaaki	Founded in 1958
12 <i>L'orient le jour</i>	Edde, Choueiri, and Pharaon families	Founded 1971 after the merging of <i>L'Orient</i> founded in 1924 and <i>Le Jour</i> in 1934.
13 <i>Nida' al-Watan</i>	Michel Mkatraf, former Phalange member March 14	Founded 2019
14 <i>The Daily Star</i>	Hariri associates and Qatar	Founded in 1952 by Kamel Mroueh Converged 2020

*Figure 1: Lebanese Newspapers and their affiliations to the political landscape.*⁸²

Nowadays, most of the Lebanese media outlets and newspapers “have more or less clear political or religious affiliations, representing the political and religious diversity extant in the

⁸¹ cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 169.

⁸² Miladi and Mellor (2021), p. 175.

nation.”⁸³ Reasons for this are the unique societal structure in Lebanon with sectarian lines that divide the country in groups of different religious affiliations.⁸⁴ The newspapers, TV channels, or radio stations “serve as the mouthpieces of political parties or businessmen,”⁸⁵ a continuity from the times of civil war when they first appeared in this dimension. In this climate of sectarian identification that directly translates to the media landscape, division is further promoted.⁸⁶ Figure 1 gives an example for these affiliations and depicts Lebanese newspapers and their ties to the respective political party. With the above-mentioned instruments that the Lebanese legal repertoire offers, Lebanese courts prosecute media outlets and journalists who dare to speak against powerful politicians or religious leaders, according to Reporters Without Borders.⁸⁷ As a result, the “main defect of the media lies in their inability to serve the genuine interests of the overall Lebanese society.”⁸⁸

Another important factor that shaped Lebanese media activity in recent years is the economic survival. Fostered by ongoing political turbulence, the media sector developed a “market mentality culture”⁸⁹ that gives little thought to social responsibility according to Nabil Dajani, a media sociologist at the American University of Beirut. The economic survival is one of the main challenges indeed:

Newspapers operating in a saturated market long propped up by political money have lost much of their influence due to hyper-competition partly brought about by the advent of the Internet, the economic crisis beleaguering the country, as well as the ongoing dominance of TV.⁹⁰

The worsening political and economic situation in Lebanon puts many newspapers in financial difficulties which, as a result, leads to either minimized activities or the closing of some newspapers.⁹¹ “The remaining few battle it out over a share of the limited advertising market or rely on subsidies provided to them by political backers from across the political spectrum in contravention of the loosely applied Press Law.”⁹² As a consequence, “the Lebanese print media today—much as the country itself—finds itself in dire straits.”⁹³ These

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 171.

⁸⁴ cf. Dajani, Nabil (2013). The Myth of Media Freedom in Lebanon. *Arab Media and Society* (18): 1–9, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Reporters Without Borders (2022). *Lebanon*. <https://rsf.org/en/lebanon>, last accessed July 2, 2022.

⁸⁶ cf. Dajani (2013), p. 1.

⁸⁷ Reporters Without Borders (2022).

⁸⁸ Dajani (2013), p. 2.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁰ El-Richani (2021), p. 167.

⁹¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 171f.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 169.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 167.

circumstances led to the ranking of Lebanon in the index of press freedom published annually by Reporters Without Borders at number 130 (of 180 countries) in 2022 which is a downward trend compared to rank number 107 in 2021.⁹⁴

To conclude, the Lebanese media sector, although long hailed for its liberal handling and freedoms resulting in a flourishing publication industry, faces a crisis caused by multiple factors. The growing consumption and influence of online media is just one factor among others. Therefore, and as a preparation for the discussion of Megaphone, counter-hegemony and the medium's location within the Lebanese media landscape, this chapter is closed by a presentation of social media and the varying definitions that implicate a certain blurring of the platform's scope subject to this thesis. Yet, this circumstance brings in some potential in the form of flexibility to conquer discursive spaces within the Lebanese media landscape which is central to the discussion towards the end of the analysis.

3.3 Defining social media

Today, social media has become an integral part of the media landscape and informs many people on a daily basis. Subscription numbers of traditional newspapers decline which forces the traditional media industry to find new ways to engage with their audience. However, the usage of social media nowadays differs from the habits five or ten years ago. This section specifies the definition of social media that applies to Megaphone.

Social media and social networking sites have evolved immensely over the past decades since the first site came into being in 1994, and so has its definition.⁹⁵ It is a term broadly used and broad in its use. As an umbrella term, it can entail

a variety of online platforms, including blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks (SN), forums, microblogs, photo sharing, product reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, SN, video sharing, and virtual worlds.⁹⁶

Different authors in different epochs have suggested differing definitions of social media. A final definition depends on the scope of what the author includes.⁹⁷ I settle on the popular definition of social media by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein:

⁹⁴ cf. Reporters Without Borders (2022).

⁹⁵ cf. Aichner, Grünfelder, Maurer and Jegeni (2021), p. 215.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ cf. *ibid.*, p. 218.

Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.⁹⁸

But what is the difference between a social network and social media? Social networks are part of the broader sphere of social media. boyd and Ellison see social network sites (SNS) as web-based services where users can “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system”⁹⁹ and share a connection with other users within this system. According to the authors, these SNS are meant to mirror real-life networks instead of being used for networking.¹⁰⁰

Murthy adds another aspect to the discussion that corresponds to Megaphone’s activities on social media. Social media can encompass all mediums

wherein ‘ordinary’ people in ordinary social networks (as opposed to professional journalists) can create user-generated ‘news’ (in a broadly defined sense). The ‘social’ part of social media refers to its distinction from ‘traditional’ media.¹⁰¹

Whereas the first definition by Kaplan and Haenlein appears to be quite general and focuses on the aspect of digital platforms, Murthy’s contribution entails the feature to create and share news on social media. In the past decade, this trend continued to bear various forms of news production online of which Megaphone is one.

This chapter introduced the context of Lebanon, the Lebanese media landscape, and its affiliations to the political factions to the reader. Definitions of traditional (also referred to as mainstream) media, as well as social media facilitate the further analysis.

4 Gramsci and hegemony

This chapter explains the theoretical background of hegemony. I present a short biography of the godfather of the concept, Gramsci, define the concept itself along a few key words to facilitate the analysis of hegemony before I link it with the media industry in Lebanon.

⁹⁸ Kaplan, Andreas M; Haenlein, Michael (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business horizons* 53: 59–68. 10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003, p. 61.

⁹⁹ boyd and Ellison (2007), p. 211.

¹⁰⁰ cf. *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Murthy (2012), p. 1061.

The root of the word hegemony can be found in the Greek word “hegemonia” which carries the notion that “an element in a system is dominant, superior to others.”¹⁰² Perry Anderson traces back the popularity of the word in literature and makes the point that it experienced an exceptional boom in the past 60 years.¹⁰³ In 1976, Anderson even claims that at the beginning of the 20th century hegemony as a concept was coined in an innovative new way by the Italian politician and philosopher Antonio Gramsci. He writes: “the word might perhaps be found in stray phrases of writers before him, it is often suggested, but the concept as a theoretical unit is his creation.”¹⁰⁴ But who was this Italian Marxist who revolutionized the understanding of power in society? Gramsci was born in Sardinia in 1891 to a middle-class family. When he grew up, Gramsci’s political views were influenced by pressing issues of his time such as the rapid changes in society caused by the industrialization and (subsequent) social inequalities between the North and the South of the country. In 1913, he joined the Italian Socialist Party. As a journalist and activist, he supported the labour unions’ mobilisation after World War I and founded a newspaper with a Bolshevik orientation, the first of its kind in Italy. The disappointment about the rigid capitalist system that did not allow to implement reforms in favour of the working class pushed him and fellow activists to look for a new political alternative. In 1921, they founded the Italian Communist Party. Three years later, in 1924, Gramsci won a seat in the Italian parliament and took over the leadership of the party because the former leader, Amadeo Bordiga, was imprisoned. In the harsh political climate of rising fascism, Gramsci followed the same fate despite his political immunity as member of parliament and stayed in prison from 1926 – 1937. He died shortly after his release in 1937 due to severe health conditions.¹⁰⁵

4.1 Theory of cultural hegemony

During his imprisonment, Gramsci filled 34 notebooks with his thoughts about politics, philosophy, and history that became famous as the *Prison Notebooks*.¹⁰⁶ It is in these notebooks that Gramsci elaborated on his concept of hegemony. Hereby, “hegemony is mostly understood as a cultural and ideological method”¹⁰⁷ with a dominant way of life and

¹⁰² Çoban (2018), p. 90.

¹⁰³ cf. Anderson, Perry (2018). *Hegemonie: Konjunktoren eines Begriffs*, 1st edn. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Anderson, Perry (1976). The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci. *New Left Review* (100): 5–78, pp. 13–14.

¹⁰⁵ cf. de Smet (2016), pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁶ cf. *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Çoban (2018), p. 90.

thought as the guiding principle. Gramsci “distinguished this from the state’s more direct dominance exercised through coercion rather than consent and negotiation.”¹⁰⁸ The following quote from *Selections of the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* gives a deeper insight into what hegemony encompasses. It is

1. The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.
2. The apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed.¹⁰⁹

Consent poses the most important element of hegemony in society, and just when the consent to the dominance of the ruling class ceases, coercion is exercised in accordance with the consent of the ruled. In practice, hegemony can be traced down to “norms, values and tastes, political practices, and social relations.”¹¹⁰

Gramsci understands society to work in a hierarchical way and observes that the dominant class accumulates power with the consent of the ruled elements in society. The ruling class maintains power twofold: It is leading (in the sense of “directive”¹¹¹) with regard to other aspiring powers or allied forces, and dominant of the rival forces.¹¹² I define acts that dismantle these workings of hegemony, and that actively counter them or pose an alternative within these power structures, as acts of counter-hegemony.

Gramsci sees civil and political society as two levels where hegemony is exercised. Civil society “is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’”¹¹³ in which economic activity is also rooted. In contrast, Gramsci equals political society to all forms of political and juridical power.¹¹⁴ Although Gramsci differentiates between civil society and political society, the distinction is mostly helpful for a theoretical understanding. In practice, the two are

¹⁰⁸ Cere (2016), p. 125.

¹⁰⁹ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 145.

¹¹⁰ Sassoon (1982) cited in Katz, Hagai (2006). Gramsci, Hegemony, and Global Civil Society Networks. *Voluntas* 17 (4): 332–347. 10.1007/s11266-006-9022-4, p. 335.

¹¹¹ For a discussion on the correct translation of the original Italian term, see Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 208.

¹¹² cf. Langemeyer, Ines (2009). Antonio Gramsci: Hegemonie, Politik des Kulturellen, geschichtlicher Block. In: Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz and Tanja Thomas (eds.). *Schlüsselwerke der Cultural Studies*. SpringerLink Bücher, pp. 72–82. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, p. 74.

¹¹³ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 145.

¹¹⁴ cf. *ibid.*

intertwined and are vital parts of what Gramsci understands to constitute the State as a whole which makes it difficult to distinguish the two spheres. Anderson identifies the site of hegemony (in the sense of direction) in civil society whereas coercion (in the sense of domination) pertains to the State.¹¹⁵ It should be noted that Gramsci's understanding differs from today's definitions of the state in political science. Hoare and Nowell Smith subsume the mutual dynamics with regard to hegemony as following:

These two levels [civil and political society] correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government.¹¹⁶

By integrating civil society into his analysis of power, he acknowledges the potential to stabilize a system that lies within civil society. Power is not maintained by pure coercion; contrary to a forced regime, the ruling class engineers mass consent on a systematic level to maintain power and the established order.¹¹⁷ It is herein that hegemony is rooted.

Hegemony is exercised by the ruling class that holds power over the State and its apparatuses. One aspect of the ruling class is its juridical and political unity; another aspect "results from the organic relations between State or political society and civil society"¹¹⁸ that is inherent to it. A concrete example that is also helpful in understanding the media hegemony in Lebanon later on, are political parties: "Classes produce parties, and parties form the personnel of State and government, the leaders of civil and political society."¹¹⁹ Hoare and Nowell Smith observe:

The party must hold together in a dialectical unity the two levels 'of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence, and civilisation, of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy.'¹²⁰

Gramsci offers a useful tool to grasp the subtle workings of power in society by expanding the understanding of how political power is exercised in a political entity. The counter-hegemonic actions of Megaphone are converse to hegemony. Therefore, the analysis of Megaphone as a medium within the Lebanese media landscape becomes tractable with the theoretical basis offered by Gramsci. Before jumping to the analysis of counter-hegemonic actions, I will briefly outline how hegemony unfolds within the Lebanese media landscape.

¹¹⁵ cf. Anderson (1976), p. 21f.

¹¹⁶ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 145.

¹¹⁷ cf. Gitlin (1980) cited in Kenix (2011), p. 10.

¹¹⁸ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 202.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 477.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 315.

4.2 Media and hegemony in Lebanon

“Hegemony emerges in every sphere in which political power exists. And political power exists in every sphere humans exist as a society,”¹²¹ states Çoban. It becomes evident that hegemony is omnipresent in all aspects of life and society. The mechanisms in our cultural togetherness are influenced by hegemonic ideas, the discourses are shifted towards the dominant way of life, political beliefs are guided by the hegemonic principles of the ruling class. Gramsci’s understanding of power anchors the ideology of the ruling class in civil society to stabilize the power through the apparatus of hegemony. This form of intellectual and moral leadership by one class over another is usually performed in civil society institutions such as the religious institutions, the sciences, the education system, the media, within the family, clubs, syndicates, and others. Gramsci terms these institutions the apparatus of hegemony.¹²² Another quote from the translation of the *Prison Notebooks* adds to it:

The school, at all levels, and the Church, are the biggest cultural organisations in every country, in terms of the number of people they employ. Then there are newspapers, magazines and the book trade and private educational institutions, either those which are complementary to the state system, or cultural institutions.¹²³

Although Gramsci emphasizes mostly cultural institutions or institutions of civil society as places of hegemonic power, he also includes newspapers and magazines in his analysis. The media sector is therefore a site where hegemony is exercised, and which serves as an example to trace the effects of hegemony which is one reason for the focus of this work. The concept delivers a useful framework to analyse the power relations that shape our everyday life of which the media is a huge part.

It is notable that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has been applied in Media and Cultural Studies before.¹²⁴ Cere states that

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony has been the most helpful formulation to date in the analysis of power relations among civil institutions like the mass media and their operations in developed and developing societies.¹²⁵

Noureddine Miladi and Noha Mellor attribute various roles to the media sector in Arab societies: “it relays state hegemonic discourse, establishes media professionals’ symbolic power as mediators, and serves as a site of contested ideas shared by diverse media users.”¹²⁶

¹²¹ Çoban (2018), p. 92.

¹²² cf. Langemeyer (2009), p. 75.

¹²³ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 654.

¹²⁴ cf. Cere (2016), p. 125.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 126.

¹²⁶ Miladi and Mellor (2021), p. 3.

Especially the first two attributes underline the complicity of the media sector in stabilizing the ideological superiority of those who are in control of the media. The last attribute can be read as a direct prolongment of the sectarian struggle in Lebanon to the media when each political party or alliance employs a media outlet for their own political output and as a way of communication with their supporters.

In the previous section, I gave the example of political parties as leaders of political and civil society. According to el-Harachi, the ruling class and media in Lebanon are intertwined as has been discussed before.¹²⁷ Hence, the media sector forms an integral part of the hegemonic class in Lebanon which brings together two aspects of hegemony. Political parties as well as media institutions are institutions of the hegemonic system. Gramsci confirms this assumption that “a newspaper too (or group of newspapers), a review (or group of reviews), is a ‘party’ or ‘fraction of a party’ or ‘a function of a particular party.’”¹²⁸ Subsequently, the alliance between these two strengthens the hegemonic bloc in Lebanon.

I should now turn to the question of how media is used to exercise hegemony. Hegemony works as a mixture of coercion and consent as was defined before. Especially the latter seems to be ideal to unfold its mechanisms by employing the media. Hereby, knowledge formation plays an integral role in the manufacturing of consent. Knowledge equals power and those in control of knowledge formation through media dissemination pull the strings to exercise hegemony.¹²⁹ After the technological advancement that was developed after World War II, the way the media were used as a communication tool changed profoundly. From then on, it became possible for state actors to “reach the masses anytime they [the ruling class] want, they can tell them what they want. Not only with these, the media are used for persuasion and propaganda all over the world,”¹³⁰ says Çoban. Furthermore, Couldry observes how the information in media is generally accepted as true and consequently shapes our beliefs of the world and our local contexts “because we believe that most others believe the same, and because we act on the basis of these beliefs on countless specific occasions.”¹³¹ As a result, he states, the media’s social authority tends to be hidden, and media power appears to be natural.¹³² Obscured authority paired with affiliations to the political society renders the media into a mouthpiece of the political fractions, thus turning it merely into a tool instead of

¹²⁷ see section 4.2.

¹²⁸ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 354.

¹²⁹ cf. Çoban (2018), p. 101.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 103.

¹³¹ Couldry (2000), p. 12.

¹³² cf. *ibid.*

preserving independent mechanism able to call out abuses of power in all areas of society and the state.

Although it depends on the individual outreach of each media outlet, it can generally be stated that the media is a strong tool to form mainstream narratives in Lebanese society. The communication of a message that is shaped by a certain ideological agenda can be seen as the formation of a consent, thus making the media complicit in the hegemony of Lebanon's ruling class. But it is not just the formation of consent to the current status quo in Lebanon. It is also the accessibility to the public audience that is enabled via media outlets or participation in TV shows, public talks and panel discussions disseminated via television. Nonetheless, alternatives such as Megaphone exist and turn the media landscape into a contested site.

5 Countering media hegemony – the case of Megaphone

I now turn to Lebanon and the specific case of Megaphone. First, I introduce the medium as the point of departure for the deeper analysis in this chapter. Afterwards, I will outline the various ways the medium confronts the hegemony of mainstream media outlets and thereby practices counter-hegemony. Gramsci's concept of hegemony encompasses different aspects such as organic intellectuals, the subaltern, and others that I will explain in the respective sections and directly wave into the context of the case study. From here on, I include my empirical material which includes the interviews, the website, other social media channels and the Instagram posts collected during the research period in February. Whenever I cite the latter, I include an Arabic and English version since Megaphone usually publishes in both languages. Therefore, the English translation is their own.

Megaphone is an “independent online media platform”¹³³ that launched in 2017 and publishes news on its social media channels. The relevant ones are Twitter (30,916 followers),¹³⁴ Instagram (118,000 followers),¹³⁵ Facebook (89,832 like this page, 125,693 follow it),¹³⁶ and

¹³³ Megaphone (2022). *Twitter*. https://twitter.com/megaphone_news, last accessed May 18, 2022.

¹³⁴ *ibid*.

¹³⁵ Megaphone (2022). *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/megaphonenews/>, last accessed July 2, 2022.

¹³⁶ Megaphone (2022). *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/MegaphoneNews>, last accessed May 18, 2022.

YouTube (6,150 subscribers).¹³⁷ According to the managing director, it had an immediate success within the smaller circles of the opposition and the anti-establishment groups before growing with the 2018 elections which the medium covered extensively. Another moment of growth was the October revolution in 2019 when the medium became “one of the main platforms for young people to follow.”¹³⁸

The medium publishes news on a daily basis on six days per week according to the evaluation of Megaphone’s Instagram activity in February. The recurring drop of posting activities on Sundays suggests a regular work week with Sundays off work. In total, Megaphone published 175 posts on Instagram during the research period in February 2022 with an average of 6,25 posts per day.

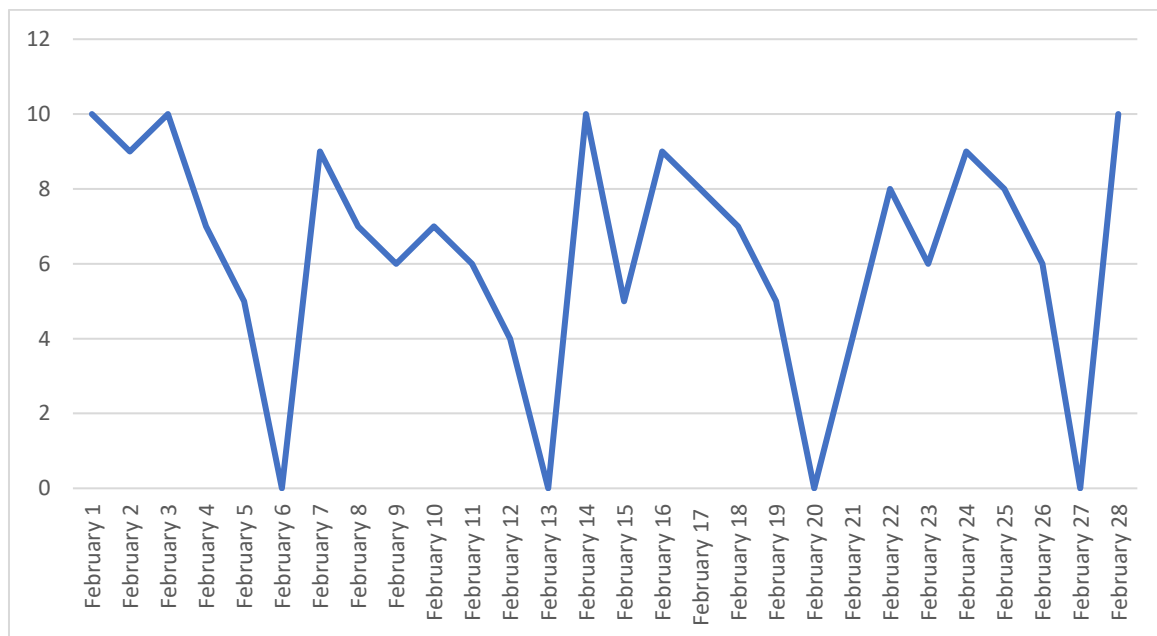


Figure 2: Megaphone’s Instagram activity in February 2022.

Regarding their political self-perception, my interview partners describe the group as involved in different areas of Lebanese politics with a left-leaning positionality.¹³⁹ The group’s essence opposes racism, sexism, chauvinism, nationalism, or sympathies towards one of the main Lebanese political parties.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Megaphone (2022). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/c/megaphonenews>, last accessed May 18, 2022. Although Megaphone uploads on YouTube regularly, most of their activities take place on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

¹³⁸ Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹³⁹ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

¹⁴⁰ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

The lack of representation in the Lebanese media landscape seemed to be one of the main motivations to launch the medium:

we also noticed the gap in the media landscape and how none of the media outlets or platforms really were tackling subjects that we wanted to focus on or the way we wanted to focus on and how alienating it was for people our age. So, we were feeling frustrated that people weren't very politically engaged but we also realized that they're not because they're not very aware of what's happening. So, we wanted to try to create a media platform that can basically bridge that gap.¹⁴¹

Both interviewees identified the young generation as the main target group since young people usually use social media frequently.¹⁴² Although social media is usually used for entertainment, Megaphone slipped into a space young people occupy to employ it as a vehicle to make politics more mainstream and to offer qualitative content for free.¹⁴³ Their philosophy follows the principle to produce and distribute analytical and explanatory content with a critical eye on recent events without acting in a patronizing way. For these reasons, they decided in the beginning to be a social media-native platform only.¹⁴⁴ The decision to be social media-based was thus taken consciously and with the aim to increase the level of conversation and discourse.

What played positively for them was the momentum of reinvention in the media world which turned and still turns more and more towards digital journalism. The lack of adaptation to social media by the established media outlets came as an opportunity to fill the gap. When traditional media just reposted their content online without altering it to make it fit for their online presence, the young collective came in and tailored their content for social media exclusively, thus conquering a niche and saving themselves a share in the market.¹⁴⁵ Here, another aim becomes obvious: to revolutionize the media industry and push it towards a more future-oriented direction.¹⁴⁶

Additionally, the medium actively supports opposition groups by giving them a platform. In their own words, back in their founding days these opposition groups “were limiting their conversation to very bland anti-corruption discourse and not tapping into the more problematic, polarizing questions.”¹⁴⁷ Megaphone assigns itself the task to not only create a

¹⁴¹ Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁴² cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

¹⁴³ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

¹⁴⁴ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁴⁵ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

¹⁴⁶ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁴⁷ Megaphone 1 (2022).

platform to present themselves to a larger audience, but also to push them to position themselves in rather difficult or delicate matters. Such matters can be related to Lebanon's role in regional politics, to (fellow) domestic actors, or to the local economy; in short, topics "that would really position one person on a political spectrum."¹⁴⁸ Additionally, topics of minority groups are of interest to Megaphone namely LGBTQI-rights, as well as migrants' and refugees' rights.¹⁴⁹

It is worth noticing that the medium underwent a development in their relatively short period of activity. As I was told the first period stretched from 2017 until 2019, when the group focused on making politics more interesting and "to have young people get less intimidated about engaging with political content online and feel way more empowered in talking about these issues."¹⁵⁰ In addition, Megaphone was meant to serve as a platform for engagement and debate. Back then, the structure was primarily volunteer-based and operated on a weekly basis.¹⁵¹ With the uprising from October 2019 onwards the mode of production shifted and challenged the model of free labour:

it became about documenting the uprising, keeping a camera in the street, making sure that violations are documented, challenging the official narratives, deconstructing them and informing more importantly about the economic collapse and what it means and all the decisions that have been taken by the government, informing also about protesters' rights and violations that are being committed, all putting the floor for writers, young writers, activists to also express themselves to the articles, opinion articles, and really tap into their political imagination of how they could reimagine the kind of contribute they would like to build.¹⁵²

Some members left their jobs to become fully engaged, others took unpaid or paid leaves from their workplaces to support the medium's growth that demanded a steady and professional workflow. Additional support in this transitional phase was offered by two senior journalists "who had joined the project right before the uprising and who had experience in running a newsroom and working in more traditional settings."¹⁵³

After this brief introduction to the medium at the centre of this analysis and a short overview about their development in the relatively short time of operation in media production, I turn now to elaborate on Megaphone's counter-hegemonic practices.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *cf. ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *cf. ibid.*

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

5.1 Dissent, organization, action

My analysis goes back to the moment when the project was born since the historical perspective gives great insights into the motivation and the context of the founding moment. Back in 2015, Lebanon faced a severe trash crisis when the garbage was not collected and piled up in the streets for weeks. Individuals organized protests that turned into a movement with the name You Stink in order to pressure the responsible politicians to clean the streets. You Stink had a huge following on social media, according to my interview partner, a founding member of the movement, and was able to communicate with a big audience on its Facebook page.¹⁵⁴ However, as my first interview partner from Megaphone stated, the movement lacked the necessary infrastructure to amplify its voice such as a political party to bring its demands into parliament, and also: a media platform.¹⁵⁵ Two years after You Stink, Megaphone came into being with the idea of “a media platform that would break the monopoly of narratives and images because it would aim at being mainstream, not just being niche.”¹⁵⁶

There are more failures in Lebanon than just uncollected waste in the streets. The neglect of the maintenance of basic infrastructure, the corruption, not to mention the ignorance of tons of explosive material in the Beirut port, all led to a deep distrust in the political virility of the government, as my general observation confirms and brings me to the first parameter of this examination: Whose hegemony is to counter? My first interviewee outlines this group as the “candidates of the establishment and the regime”¹⁵⁷ in reference to the upcoming elections. The second interview reveals the “anti-establishment”¹⁵⁸ sentiments within the collective, which leads to the conclusion that they oppose every member of the current political establishment. That encompasses the political parties, too, and since the political parties are affiliated with the media outlets, also the affiliated media outlets.

It is interesting to look at this as an example of how civil society and political society according to Gramsci’s definition overlap in Lebanon. The political parties hold political power, thus being an integral part of the political society. Whereas the media outlets, as private institutions active in the economic sphere, are part of the civil sphere.¹⁵⁹ Their

¹⁵⁴ cf. You Stink (2022).

¹⁵⁵ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁵⁹ cf. Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 145.

connection uncovers the power the media outlets hold and how much they are integrated into the system of power. Both my interviewees have understood that, speaking with Gramsci, power is not just accumulated in the political society. Instead, people at Megaphone are “quite upfront in criticizing all forms of power, not just political power but also the power of big businessman, of religious authorities, of all of that.”¹⁶⁰

That brings me to the first and most profound condition to tackle hegemony. What lies in the act of opposing the media outlets and the political society in Lebanon, is the act to express dissent. Dissent is preceded by the realization of dissatisfaction with a state of affairs and a subsequent

appeal to others. [...] Whether this dissent is expressed against a set of individuals in power, or a set of given circumstances, or a general perceived injustice, the same logic applies. Such claims are always already claims for justice, and as such appeal to shared collective interests.¹⁶¹

Expressions of dissent can be vocalized “against an unjust law and try to have it changed, campaigning, appealing to civil society, protesting on the streets, and so forth.”¹⁶² In the WANA region

dissent existed long before the Internet. Yet digital media helped to turn individualized, localized, and community-specific dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities for action.¹⁶³

Megaphone constitutes an instrument to voice dissent which happens within a certain democratic environment that allows it to do so.¹⁶⁴ Dissent within the current political, economic, financial, and social crises is channelled through the medium and pervasive in all its posts on social media and obvious in posts framed as such. The growing number of followers and the transformation towards a more professional structure are proof of the support and the shared expression of dissent in the Lebanese society. Dissent becomes part of an ideology that opposes hegemony and that is vital for change. Among ideology, Hagai Katz also identifies organization and action as conditions that need to arise in order to counter hegemony.¹⁶⁵ The people behind the medium became aware of the media hegemony and at the same time realized their own potential to acquire hegemony which is according to Çoban

¹⁶⁰ Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹⁶¹ Hands (2011), p. 4.

¹⁶² *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Howard, Philip N; Hussain, Muzammil M. (2011). The Role of Digital Media. *Journal of Democracy* 22 (3): 35–48. 10.1353/jod.2011.0041, p. 41.

¹⁶⁴ cf. Hands (2011), p. 4.

¹⁶⁵ cf. Katz (2006), p. 336.

“the only way to break and crumble the hegemony.”¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, it is in the decision to take action that I root the most profound act of counter-hegemony which my first interview partner confirms:

Megaphone was a platform where you could talk about all these [political] issues without having the constraints of the political groups that were calculating in a sense, their discourse and trying to please everybody. So, it also came as a reaction to that.¹⁶⁷

When the birth of the project equates to organization, action is the direct result and continues as long as Megaphone produces and publishes news as an act to construct an alternative reality for their followers and consumers.

Here comes, as is referenced in the logo of the media outlet, the megaphone. The megaphone is usually used on the streets to amplify the voice of a person that formulates demands of the bigger group. In a metaphorical way, the collective fills in this position within the media landscape. Instead of staying silent, they take the megaphone to social media and run a platform that is widely followed among the youth and represents their dissent with the current state of political affairs.

5.2 Countering Narratives – countering hegemony

Dissent, organization, and action are at the core of Megaphone’s counter-hegemonic structure and form the basis for further action. Another aspect of action is to counter the narratives that prevail in the media landscape. It is rooted in the core values of Megaphone as can be read on their website:

Megaphone questions and counters the establishment's entrenched narratives, and features stories and voices of marginalized groups that are often excluded or stigmatized by traditional media. We act as a watchdog to both the political establishment and the media landscape, exposing misleading and inaccurate stories and statements.¹⁶⁸

This is confirmed during the first interview when my interview partner underlines that “the vision of the whole team [...] is to break that monopoly of narratives and images of TVs and big players.”¹⁶⁹ The act of dissent and the resulting act of counter-hegemony is reproduced in every piece of news they publish and every day the medium continues to exist. Counter-

¹⁶⁶ Çoban (2018), p. 101.

¹⁶⁷ Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹⁶⁸ Megaphone (2022). *About*. <https://megaphone.news/about?lang=english>, last accessed July 2, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Megaphone 1 (2022).

hegemony, as a result, becomes a social practice that is performed and justifies the existence of the medium itself.

Hegemony and the system of power is maintained by many mechanisms. One of such mechanism is the function of intellectuals of the ruling class. Their functions are “organisational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.”¹⁷⁰ As a tangible example, Gramsci identifies the members of the Church (in medieval times) as intellectuals that maintain and participate in the system of cultural-religious power organizing society.¹⁷¹

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci makes an interesting suggestion when he introduces the organic intellectuals to widen the notion of intellectual activity. Hoare and Nowell Smith state that all humans “are potentially intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social function.”¹⁷² The two authors further explain organic intellectuals as people that

are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong.¹⁷³

In the following section, I develop the point that the contributors to Megaphone are organic intellectuals although in a differing sense to what Gramsci originally meant. As a Marxist thinker, he adopts a hierarchical understanding of the different elements in society. It means that he speaks of a dominant class, the bourgeoisie, and a class ruled by the dominant one, the working class. In his opinion, the latter holds the revolutionary potential since it was the working class that laboured in the productive sectors back in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and produced the wealth of the bourgeoisie and dominant class. According to his writings, I understand that he divides society by horizontal lines. In contrast to this, I observe an additional structuring of the Lebanese society based on the division by sectarian lines. In this special case of Lebanon, society is divided by horizontal lines between working class and bourgeoisie *and* by vertical lines along the different religious affiliations. As a consequence, I see revolutionary potential in Megaphone’s staff members and contributors and in their

¹⁷⁰ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 145.

¹⁷¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁷² *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

organically intellectual activities, although they come from an elite background themselves.¹⁷⁴ The circumstance that people within Megaphone could be labelled as intellectuals in the classical sense does not exclude the capacity that derives from a certain consciousness of discriminations of various kinds. Therefore, I identify parts of the middle class or even the elite itself to own counter-hegemonic potential. Counter-hegemonic actions against the media sector demand a minimum of resources, education, and knowledge. Furthermore, with their initiative to launch Megaphone, direct steps were taken to take matters in their own hands and to perform in their own intellectual capacity, one that undermines the ruling elite instead of stabilizing it. Therefore, I would like to make the case that counter-hegemony is not necessarily sparked from below but from within. What should be noted here is that Gramsci developed his ideas having in mind a specific moment in Italian history that differs from the context of this case study. A direct comparison would miss the point because the circumstances in Lebanon and the dispositions of the Lebanese society make a unique case of its own. The analysis is nonetheless fruitful as this chapter will prove.

Hoare and Nowell Smith support my point by framing the organic intellectuals as a concept to counter structures of power in general. What the working class was to the Italian bourgeoisie in the 20th century was the bourgeoisie to the church and monarchy before it came to power.¹⁷⁵ It proves that the function of the organic intellectuals was to question hierarchies and asymmetries in power relations, “thus disrupting the dominant hegemonic project of any given society,”¹⁷⁶ a function inherent to Megaphone’s core values. Last but not least, Gramsci itself acknowledged the fact that resistance can also be practiced by forces with a more dominant background within society.¹⁷⁷ Megaphone is exemplary for such forces in their display of how change can be triggered from within.

When the general idea of intellectuals is widened to include all people who employ a minimum of their intellect, revolutionary potential is able to unfold. Moreover, when a medium like Megaphone publishes news and counters the mainstream narratives prevailing in the Lebanese media landscape, their (organic) intellectual capacities enable them to spark revolutionary potential. During my research period, two topics with potential for dissent stood

¹⁷⁴ Another option to frame the differences in class and religion in Lebanon could be Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus which describes cultural habits, practices, skills, and dispositions which are usually shared by people with a similar background. cf. Bourdieu, Pierre; Nice, Richard (2013). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*: Cambridge University Press, p. 72f.

¹⁷⁵ cf. Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 132.

¹⁷⁶ Cere (2016), p. 126.

¹⁷⁷ cf. Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 561.

out. The first is the coverage of the port explosion whose significance for the collective behind Megaphone was mentioned several times during the interviews.¹⁷⁸ The second topic were posts about the assassination of Lebanese journalist Lokman Slim on social media. I elaborate on these two topics in order to make it comprehensible how Megaphone counters narratives.

The port explosion in August 2020 shook the city and cost the lives of many people. The Lebanese as well as the international community have since asked for a thorough investigation to identify those responsible for the blast and to assess the failures of the government. A report by Human Rights Watch from August 2021 revealed the extent to which investigations into the port blast have been prevented by government officials, or how members of the government have been protected to avoid questioning.¹⁷⁹ It makes one question the willingness of the Lebanese government to cooperate on this matter and to clarify the circumstances of the biggest non-nuclear explosion to date.

Given the possibility that government officials had known about the improper storage of confiscated ammonium nitrate in the port area and had not acted on it, it is an act of counter-hegemony to shed light on a matter that some people might want forgotten. Since it “has taken a big share of the editorial line”¹⁸⁰ and has been the subject of a few posts in February, it shows the continuous effort of the medium to cover the topic. It is not only the port explosion and the ongoing investigation into it they report on, but also the struggles to demand for justice voiced by the relatives of the victims.¹⁸¹ Three exemplary posts are presented here. One posting shows a video of relatives of the victims to demand an answer to their call for justice. The description of the post addresses it:

أهالي ضحايا انفجار المرفأ يقطعون الطريق أمام قصر العدل للمطالبة ببيت طلبات الرد التي تعرقل التحقيق.

*(Families of port explosion victims block roads in front of the Palace of Justice demanding that rulings be issued on the requests for recusal that are impeding the investigation.)*¹⁸²

In a longer post from February 10, Megaphone reports once again on the protests in front of the justice palace in Beirut and explains the chant of the protesters and its meaning within the

¹⁷⁸ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

¹⁷⁹ cf. Human Rights Watch (2021). *They Killed Us from the Inside: An Investigation into the August 4 Beirut Blast*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast>, last accessed July 2, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹⁸¹ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁸² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZsBnQxpYU5/>, last accessed June 6, 2022.

context of the investigation.¹⁸³ The last post focuses on a petition “against the government’s plan to demolish the Beirut Port silos, arguing ‘that the fate of the silos lies within the public interest.’”¹⁸⁴

The second topic whose reporting activity I identify as counter-hegemonic is the assassination of Lokman Slim. Slim was a Lebanese writer, political commentator, and activist who was outspoken against the Lebanese government and Hezbollah’s strong position in the country. He was found shot dead on February 4, 2021, in southern Lebanon after he went to visit a friend.¹⁸⁵ The circumstances of his death remain unclear today.¹⁸⁶ As a public figure with a voice that was heard and got noticed, to commemorate his death on Megaphone’s social media page reveals a certain stance towards Slim. For the first anniversary of Slim’s death, Megaphone published posts about him and the circumstances of his assassination. The descriptions varied from a single sentence to more information, and from text-based posts to posts in video format, for example:

إحياء الذكرى السنوية الأولى لاغتيال الكاتب والناشط لقمان سليم.
(*Commemoration of writer and activist Lokman Slim, a year after his assassination.*)¹⁸⁷

In another post, information is added about the Lokman Slim foundation and how it initiates an Arab-wide and international information campaign about political assassinations:

في الذكرى السنوية الأولى لاغتيال الكاتب لقمان سليم، بدأت مؤسسة لقمان سليم مساء اليوم الأربعاء حملة إعلامية عربية وعالمية لكسر الصمت المحيط بموضوع الاغتيال السياسي.

(*On the first commemoration of the assassination of writer Lokman Slim, the Lokman Slim Foundation launched on Wednesday an Arab and international campaign to break the silence surrounding political assassinations.*)¹⁸⁸

The mother of the assassinated journalist is given the platform to speak in a video in which she reveals her own personal feeling that the Lebanese party Hezbollah could be behind the killing of her son.¹⁸⁹ The repost of a snippet from an interview Slim’s mother gave to the newspaper An-Nahār without denial of this information leads to the conclusion that Megaphone supports the possibility that Hezbollah was behind the assassination. Being one of

¹⁸³ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZy3lvzr0h1/>, last accessed June 6, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ_s0j5Iq1V/, last accessed June 6, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ cf. Chulov, Martin (2021). Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim found dead in Lebanon. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/04/hezbollah-critic-lokman-slim-found-dead-in-lebanon>, last accessed May 6, 2022.

¹⁸⁶ cf. Rose, Sunniva (February 2, 2022). Lokman Slim assassination: one year on, Lebanese intellectual’s absence leaves void. *The National*. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/02/02/lokman-slim-assassination-one-year-on-lebanese-intellectuals-absence-leaves-void/>, last accessed June 15, 2022.

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZh1rp0tkB0/>, last accessed June 7, 2022.

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZe74BDr01t/>, last accessed June 7, 2022.

¹⁸⁹ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZbsHGMtfgk/>, last accessed June 7, 2022.

the more influential political factions in Lebanon does not render Hezbollah immune or excludes it from being held accountable for its actions. Therefore, to make her claims public is a gesture of counter-hegemony and shows the dauntlessness and intrepidity of the medium. The hegemony of Hezbollah within the boundaries of its political strongholds might be unbreakable at this point. However, within the scope of social media and its users Megaphone claims influence of their own to counter the narratives of officials and of the political society.

5.3 Organizational structure and funding as means of counter-hegemony

After the analysis of the ideological drivers of the medium and how Megaphone counters narratives on social media, I turn to examine the structural peculiarity of Megaphone with regard to media production. Also, when discussing Gramsci, one cannot ignore the economic side of his arguments. His Marxist background left its mark on his perspective on power and hegemony; therefore, I consider the funding structure of Megaphone for the examination of their means of production, too.

Megaphone was founded by nine people and is officially registered as a not-for-profit organisation (شركة مدنية غير ربحية, civil, not-for-profit company). The medium grew to the current number of 18 staff members of which half work part-time and the other half full-time. Two members perform administrative roles while the remaining members work in the production or distribution of the content. The group is composed of different teams that are headed by a managing person. The medium tries to eliminate hierarchies within the group as much as possible. As a result, it works with a two-tier structure between the strategic team composed of the managers of the teams and the others. The media outlet's strategy is developed collectively during an annual meeting where all decisions are based on the principle of consensus. The strategic team comes together in daily meetings and implements the group's strategy in their teams.¹⁹⁰ It is important to the people behind the medium to share the same mindset. This is based on the principle of consensus and debate which is at the core of the structure of the collective and guides the daily teamwork as well as the above-mentioned meetings.¹⁹¹ The onboarding process is exemplary for it. It was and according to my second interview partner, still is guided by trust and shared views. At first, when the model was entirely volunteer based, Megaphone recruited from their group of friends. After

¹⁹⁰ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

¹⁹¹ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

the professionalization of the structure, they retained the principle of trust in their working structure and work environment.¹⁹² As an outcome, their editorial work is published under the name Megaphone instead of an individual signature, unless it is a piece of opinion.¹⁹³

The principle of trust and the flat hierarchies that structure the medium are oppositional to the hierarchical structures of traditional media houses. If hegemony infiltrates all aspects of media production, a differing approach to a media outlet's structure poses a first step into the direction of counter-hegemonic agency. The structure of an organisation sets the stage for further action and convinces the audience of their integrity. Hereby, it is important to understand the organizational structure as a social practice itself. Hands cites Couldry who argues: "any lasting challenge to media power requires a different social practice."¹⁹⁴ Therefore, the differing social practice to big media outlets that Megaphone established as their mode of operation nurtures counter-hegemony.

The media platform works to journalistic standards that are "credibility, accuracy, witness, investigation, reporting, timeliness" and complements these with other techniques "to establish authority, such as eyewitness accounts, sourcing, quotes, images, video, and reputation."¹⁹⁵ Megaphone expands their journalistic practices to include user reports as well. As part of the medium's philosophy, their inboxes on the different platforms are open to the community to submit indications of events or protests. During the interviews, it became clear that user reports and hints from citizens are a common source that, nonetheless, need verification from other sources. Before these are considered and published online, the information undergoes a check-up that includes double or even triple checking with other national and international news platforms or journalists known to the group.¹⁹⁶ This is not only a core principle of journalistic practice but an alternative social practice in media production. "In Gramscian terms, they [journalism practices] are hegemonic practices that appear natural; it seems that there is no other way of doing journalism."¹⁹⁷ Megaphone however complements these practices and proves that there is another way of doing

¹⁹² cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁹³ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹⁹⁴ Hands (2011), p. 59.

¹⁹⁵ Radsch, Courtney (2011). Arab Bloggers as Citizen Journalists (Transnational). In: John Derek Hall Downing (ed.). *Encyclopedia of social movement media*, pp. 61–64. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, p. 61.

¹⁹⁶ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

¹⁹⁷ Atton, Chris (2011). Alternative Media. In: John Derek Hall Downing (ed.). *Encyclopedia of social movement media*, pp. 15–20. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications, p. 17.

journalism indeed, thus challenging the hegemony of journalistic practices in general and of their mainstream counterparts in particular.

Their non-journalistic background allowed the group to approach their content production from a different starting point and to integrate the criticism they had and to counteract accordingly. I assume they integrated their principles and continued to follow them when they onboarded two senior journalists to professionalize their activities. These principles are reflected in their structure of strategic meetings with the whole board and their objective to put consensus at the centre of their collective actions.¹⁹⁸

News production in Lebanon is fairly limited as El-Richani reports:

To help limit the number, the Ministry of Information was tasked with withdrawing the licenses granted to publications that have been dormant or have published less than 32 copies per year. However, the Ministry of Information largely refrained from implementing this decree, and owners circuitously circumvented this threshold when needed. As a result, anyone wanting to start a newspaper had to purchase an existing newspaper license from those lucky 110 who had previously been licensed. The prices of the licenses were extortionate and beyond the means of most Lebanese. This hurdle to starting a paper has largely been curtailed by the Internet since a news site is not subject to this condition.¹⁹⁹

Megaphone's choice of social media as their main platform for distribution is a smart move in light of these restrictions. Additionally, the financial costs of starting a medium operating within the traditional media sector, would pose a real obstacle for such an endeavour. Turning to the financial side of the project, the analysis provides some indications for the potential of Megaphone in the future. According to my first interview partner, "around 80% to 90% of our funds are coming from grants and these grants are from either media development organisations or are just general funding organisations."²⁰⁰ It is of great importance to the medium to be able to operate freely without oversight during the production process. In addition to that, grants are accepted from foundations and donors they share similar values with and do not impose editorial restrictions. These are namely at the time of writing this thesis the

European Endowment for Democracy, International Media Support, Canal France international, Open Society Foundation, The Asfari Foundation, Samir Kassir Foundation, The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture – AFAC.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

¹⁹⁹ El-Richani (2021), p. 169.

²⁰⁰ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁰¹ Megaphone (2022). *About*.

In addition to that, donations are another source of revenue as well as paid projects or co-produced videos “with like-minded entities” such as think tanks, research centres, or other organisations that share the same editorial values.²⁰²

The business model contests the classic model of traditional media outlets in Lebanon which is heavily reliant on advertising and funding from the political society, yet another overlap in the relation between civil and political society.²⁰³ Concerning the first pillar, Lebanon currently faces the worst economic crisis in decades which makes advertisement redundant in a country with an estimated 82% of the population affected by multidimensional poverty.²⁰⁴ The second pillar is also decimated for the same reason of crisis and the general crisis traditional media has been in since 2016, according to my interview partner.²⁰⁵ In this way, Megaphone seems to be better prepared for the future of the industry and better equipped against the repercussions of an economic downfall. It is herein that I see another structural feature to counter hegemony that lies at the structural core of the medium.

The choice to be a social media-based news outlet shapes their form of productivity. From the beginning the people behind Megaphone were motivated to reach their audience on a platform they regularly use and have mastered.²⁰⁶ Their daily work focuses on producing and distributing analytical, explanatory, and yet critical content in a non-patronizing way, to encourage their audience to stop scrolling their feed and to consume a flashy card that tells them “there’s something just happening.”²⁰⁷ It is the short span of attention on social media that content creators compete over “which forces you to be fast, snappy, to say things briefly, to hook people, to charm them to actually read the content.”²⁰⁸ My first interview partner pragmatically accepts this as rules of the game because they are primarily driven to have an impact.²⁰⁹ Another aspect of using social media as their main base is that it challenges traditional media and the crisis it finds itself in nowadays. According to my interview partner, a few years ago traditional media such as TVs and newspapers “were just reposting the same kind of content they had [...]. Nothing adapted to the tool of social media.”²¹⁰ As a medium

²⁰² Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁰³ cf. *ibid.*

²⁰⁴ cf. United Nations (2022). The analysis of multidimensional poverty takes into account multiple factors beyond income, such as access to the health system, the education system, and public utilities.

²⁰⁵ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁰⁶ cf. *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

²⁰⁸ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁰⁹ cf. *ibid.*

²¹⁰ *ibid.*

that started directly on social media, it gave Megaphone a certain advantage in the realm of social media to compete with traditional media and thus challenge traditional media's hegemony. The availability of their content on Creative Commons' licenses is yet another nuance to question traditional media production.²¹¹ The biggest and most visible outcome is the constant flow of information on their social media channels, in short, the provision of an online news infrastructure that supports their aim to "to present information in an accessible way through social media, playing the game of social media to the fullest, while not compromising on the quality and integrity of the actual content"²¹² and to create interest on a platform for engagement and debate.²¹³

TV and radio have restricted access for consumers' involvement in news production as well as limitations in terms of economic participation. The following filters prohibit access: "size, ownership, and profit orientation of mass media which ensures that those without capital do not have access to the means of production of the mass media."²¹⁴ As a contrasting example Megaphone holds the potential to disrupt economic barriers limiting access to news production. Moreover, it disrupts the hegemonic division and hierarchy between producers and consumers, which is equally political. The medium and its production modes give testimony to it as was explained in this section. Key in contesting media hegemony "is thus collective action, organisation and the realisation of a genuine shift in the circuits of production and consumption."²¹⁵ Moreover, Hands refers to Couldry and cites his

useful set of criteria for identifying practices that genuinely contest media power [...]. Such media need to include:

1. New ways of consuming media, which explicitly contest the social legitimacy of media power;
2. New infrastructures of production, which have an effect on who can produce media and in what circumstances;
3. New infrastructures of distribution, which change the scale and terms on which symbolic production in one place can reach other places."²¹⁶

Megaphone's news production ticks all boxes of these criteria. First, the social media-based medium takes advantage of social media as an alternative way to consume media, thereby contesting the social legitimacy of media power. Second and third, from the non-hierarchical

²¹¹ cf. *ibid.*

²¹² *ibid.*

²¹³ cf. *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Chomsky and Herman (1994) cited in Hands (2011), p. 48.

²¹⁵ Hands (2011), p. 52.

²¹⁶ Couldry (2003) cited in Hands (2001), pp. 67–68.

structure of the medium to the usage of social media as the main infrastructure of news distribution, Megaphone challenges traditional ways of media production, thus countering the hegemony of big media outlets.

However, it should be kept in mind that social media is a limited space which is also recognized during the interview as, for instance, TV channels are still widely consumed and hold a bigger market share than social media: “But the point is to be able to compete with TVs, to compete with those players. And for that to happen we have to scale up.”²¹⁷

5.4 Gramsci’s common sense or how to alter cultural realities

After I argued in favour of structurally inherent counter-hegemonic features of Megaphone such as ideology, action, narrative-formation, and the structural particularities, I move on to examine counter-hegemonic characteristics in their work that are directed outwards. This chapter treats the aspect of informing people and how it corresponds to a counter-hegemonic practice.

Hegemony is the combination of forced rule that meets the consent of the ruled. The state in this equation, establishes a system to educate and manufacture consent in schools, in universities and other educational institutions.²¹⁸ In Lebanon, public and free education is offered along with private schools and universities. However, “poor infrastructure and bureaucracy in many public schools is reflecting on the quality of education and driving students away towards private schools which are rather expensive.”²¹⁹ In addition, the three most prestigious universities in Beirut (American University of Beirut, Université Saint-Joseph, Lebanese American University) are private institutions. This observation aligns with Gramsci’s comment about the education system: “private organisms, left to the private initiative of the ruling class.”²²⁰ The education system transfers fact-based knowledge, yet there seems to be another form of knowledge that structures everyday life and that is transferred outside of the education institutions. It is what Gramsci labels as common sense in his *Prison Notebooks*.²²¹ Common sense includes the

²¹⁷ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²¹⁸ cf. Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 527.

²¹⁹ Takieddine, Abir Riad (2019). Labor Market and Education in Lebanon: The Missing Link. *IJEF* 11 (10): 42. 10.5539/ijef.v11n10p42, p. 48.

²²⁰ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 527.

²²¹ The original Italian wording is “senso comune” which differs from the meaning of the English word common sense. For further discussion and differentiation between the English and Italian wording, see Crehan, Kate

accumulation of taken-for-granted ‘knowledge’ to be found in every human community. In any given time and place, this accumulation provides a heterogeneous bundle of assumed certainties that structure the basic landscapes within which individuals are socialized and chart their individual life courses.²²²

In other words, it is “the beliefs and opinions held in common, or thought to be held in common, by the mass of the population,”²²³ and “the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed.”²²⁴ Moreover, the principal elements of common sense are provided by religion, and consequently the relationship between common sense and religion is much more intimate than that between common sense and the philosophical systems of the intellectuals.²²⁵ In face of the societal structure in Lebanon that is governed by religious affiliations mirrored in the demographics, it seems more than realistic that the common sense is strongly influenced by religious powers.

The development of one’s sense of what is common in society takes place in the realm of cultural activity and is therefore subject to hegemony. That derives from the fact that the ruling class’s foundation is “equivalent to the creation of a *Weltanschauung*.”²²⁶ When the ruling class is able to control what is perceived as common and normal in society, it can stabilize the normality of its own ruling and the feeling of the inevitability of the status quo as the right option.

The process of common-sense formation is not linear or traceable in its entirety. It is formed and transmitted in “the myriad forms of socialization to which we are exposed: home, neighbourhood, school, work, the *mass media*, *social media*, and on and on.”²²⁷ The reference of media and social media is important for the analysis of Megaphone as part of the Lebanese media landscape. Common sense is partially informed by social media, the platform Megaphone is active on. It means the medium holds power to influence the formation of common sense among its users.

It is this intersection of education and social media that I identify another instrument of counter-hegemony. Megaphone takes active steps to inform its followership about political,

(2016). *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequalities and Its Narratives*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

²²² Crehan (2016), p. 43.

²²³ *ibid.*, p. 44.

²²⁴ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 769.

²²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 770.

²²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 711 (emphasis in the original).

²²⁷ Crehan (2016), p. 60 (emphasis by the author).

economic, and social topics. Since Megaphone is mostly social media-based, its follower base is of a certain demographic “which are the people below 30, or 30-35.”²²⁸ Furthermore,

it would clearly target people [...] who have lost interest in politics and have no longer been following traditional media. This was before the uprising of course. After the uprising the interest was there, and it was about. And the whole point of Megaphone was to present information in an accessible way through social media.²²⁹

This quote shows that Megaphone achieved the first step to generate interest among their target group and was able to give an incentive for young people to follow politics again. The education of the young generation is an act of counter-hegemony because they hold much potential for change. Once the target group has been politicized, the perception of what is common and what is not has been sensitized.

Concrete actions on Megaphone’s side are informational, almost educational videos about political, economic as well as social topics. My second interviewee gave me examples of an explanatory video about the interplay of the media and the judiciary system in Lebanon, a documentary about the economic failures, and another one about the public debate on TV about hitting women. Besides, all kinds of current affairs are subject to their reporting activity.²³⁰

The ongoing informational campaign about the elections are proof to my point. In 2018 as well as in 2022, Megaphone covered the electoral “law, the candidates, the candidates from the independent lists, and how [...] the lists were being formed, what are the main [...] battles. And then after the elections the results.”²³¹ A concrete example is a six-minute video in cooperation with the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung which was posted on February 26 and explains the repertoire of techniques used by the ruling politicians to ensure their electoral gains.²³² A day before, the medium posted a summary of highlights prior to the elections in the form of an elections digest to inform voters about candidates from different parties and their campaigns.²³³ Another post from February 22 reports on Hezbollah’s and the Lebanese Forces’ use of sectarian speech with reference to Syrian and Israeli occupations. Megaphone argues that it obscured the electoral program, saying:

²²⁸ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²²⁹ *ibid.*

²³⁰ *cf.* Megaphone 2 (2022).

²³¹ *ibid.*

²³² *cf.* <https://www.instagram.com/p/CacfOEMo9pi/>, last accessed May 19, 2022.

²³³ *cf.* <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaaUMBDILxy/>, last accessed May 19, 2022.

وإذ يُغَيِّب خطاب التخوين أي حديث عن برامج انتخابية، رأى رئيس المجلس السياسي في حزب الله إبراهيم أمين السيد «أنهم يريدون سلاحنا ومقاومتنا ومجتمعنا [في الانتخابات] لكي تكون الكلمة في بلدنا لإسرائيل وأميركا.»

بالمقابل، تبني رئيس حزب القوات اللبنانية سمير جعجع خطاب التهويل، من دون أن يفوت فرصة تكريس الاستقطاب العمودي في المجتمع على أبواب الانتخابات النيابية، مشيراً إلى أنها «حرب تحرير سياسية.»

(The “treason” discourse obscures any talk of electoral program, and the head of Hezbollah’s political council, Ibrahim Amin al-Sayed stated that “they want our weapons, our resistance, our community [in the elections] to give the last word in our country to Israel and the U.S.”

*In turn, head of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea used an alarmist discourse, not missing the opportunity to consecrate vertical polarization in society before parliamentary elections, stating that it is “a political liberation war.”*²³⁴

To shed light on the fact that information about their political program is omitted by both parties, and to call them out on their sectarian speech is an act of counter-hegemony. On the one hand, Megaphone questions the norm of electoral campaigning which consists of sectarian assets, and on the other hand, demands tangible results from the political parties. The group questions what the norm in electoral campaigns has been and, by that, opens up the opportunity to change the common sense among the followers.

5.5 The subaltern – Megaphone as a platform for the marginalized

The founding members of Megaphone met at the elite university American University of Beirut, and as I mentioned before, do not share the same experience as the working class in Lebanon. Although the staff of the medium comes from a middle-class background, their work corresponds with the concept of the subaltern within the limits of the Lebanese political and media landscape.²³⁵ For this reason, I would like to tie together Gramsci’s understanding of the subaltern with the work of Megaphone in this section. Moreover, as Cere notices: “the concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony and organic/traditional intellectual cannot be seen in isolation from another Gramscian concept: the subaltern.”²³⁶ This underlines the importance of the subaltern to hegemony and why it cannot be left out.

²³⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaSWfuqUz8/>, last accessed May 19, 2022.

²³⁵ This analysis is based on Gramsci’s understanding of the subaltern solely. It does not take into account the contributions by later authors, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, or scholars from the Subaltern Studies Group although their contributions take Gramsci as a point of departure and, therefore, bear similarities with his work. For further literature, see Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1993). *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In: Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader*, pp. 66–111. Abingdon, OX: Routledge.

²³⁶ Cere (2016), p. 126.

It is hard to start off with a definition of the subaltern since Gramsci did not give one in his *Prison Notebooks*. The meaning of the word is rather communicated through its usage. Scholarship even discussed the possibility that Gramsci invented the word to circumvent prison censorship and actually meant the proletariat in general. Marcus Green, however, proves the originality of the concept “that originated out of his [Gramsci’s] multifaceted and open-ended investigation of Italian politics, culture, and history.”²³⁷ Further, he subsumes the categories that Gramsci used in relation to the subaltern in his historical analysis of power relations between the ruling class and the ruled which exceeds the meaning of proletariat:

slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, the popolani (common people) and popolo (people) of the medieval communes, the proletariat, and the bourgeoisie prior to the Risorgimento.²³⁸

The common properties of these groups are “exclusion, domination, and marginality in their various forms”²³⁹ through which the reader can understand the constitution of subalternity. Especially the exclusion from “participating in dominant political institutions”²⁴⁰ helps to connect the concept with the context of Megaphone’s work. In addition, Megaphone’s own definition of marginalized groups corresponds to the framing of the subaltern:

refugees, migrant workers... everybody basically that doesn’t have a natural place in the traditional media or if they are featured in traditional media, it would actually be to stigmatize them or to throw some hate speech against them.²⁴¹

My second interview partner complements the list and stresses:

we try to champion or to amplify the voices of marginalized people, for example the domestic workers who have been released from houses or kicked out without their salary, without their passport [...], LGBTQ community, women rights.²⁴²

For the further analysis, I equate the subaltern with marginalized groups as Megaphone defines them.

Exemplary of the reporting activity on subaltern causes is a post from February 5 about the mistreatment of a Kenyan houseworker in Lebanon whose employer withheld salaries and her passport,²⁴³ a common practice facilitated by the sponsorship system to recruit migrant

²³⁷ Green, Marcus E. (2011). Rethinking the subaltern and the question of censorship in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks. *Postcolonial Studies* 14 (4): 387–404. 10.1080/13688790.2011.641913, p. 393.

²³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 388.

²³⁹ *ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 394.

²⁴¹ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁴² Megaphone 2 (2022).

²⁴³ cf. https://www.instagram.com/p/CZmBmarqF_v/, last accessed May 20, 2022.

workers and exploit them in the shadow of dependencies.²⁴⁴ On February 3, Megaphone reported with a three-slide post on a strike by workers of the garbage industry while the framing in their caption suggests a favourable point of view towards the workers' demands:

بدأ عمال شركتي رامكو وسيتي بلو إضراباً، الإثنين، بعد تأخر رواتبهم العالقة بين مصرف لبنان ووزارة المال.

(*Ramco and City Blue workers began a strike on Monday, to protest their unpaid salaries that are stuck between the Banque du Liban and the Finance Ministry.*)²⁴⁵

Megaphone counters the hegemony because it stands in solidarity with the workers in both cases. The migrant and the national workers are both subject to exploitation. It is the act of reporting to shed light on their struggle in which the potential of counter-hegemony unfolds. The critical understanding of the conditions of exploitation, domination, and marginality and the naming of them is vital to their transformation.²⁴⁶

Megaphone also reported on the struggles of depositors in Lebanon who demonstrated in front of the Bank Audi in downtown Beirut on February 18 to contest the draft budget of the government which included the proposal to confiscate depositors' savings in order to stabilize the financial crisis.²⁴⁷ The video, shot on the ground within the group of demonstrators, pictures clashes between the demonstrators and the Internal Security Forces.

Another post that corresponds to the subaltern category of exclusion covers the rationing of cancer drugs and other medication in Lebanon, yet another result of the economic crisis.²⁴⁸ Megaphone unveils the impacts of the crises on the population and thereby identifies the material living conditions as well as to introduce a consciousness within the population for their collective struggles in order to make transformation possible.²⁴⁹

Another interesting, political aspect of the media is the inaccessibility of the opposition groups to mainstream TV stations and their airtime which my interview partner explained to be "too expensive or politically impossible."²⁵⁰ During my interview with a social media committee member from the opposition party Minteshreen, this information was confirmed:

²⁴⁴ cf. Pande, Amrita (2013). "The Paper that you Have in Your Hand is My Freedom": Migrant Domestic Work and the Sponsorship (Kafala) System in Lebanon. *International Migration Review* 47 (2): 414–441. 10.1111/imre.12025, pp. 418–419.

²⁴⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZhROTfIeVf/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁴⁶ cf. Green (2011), p. 388.

²⁴⁷ cf. https://www.instagram.com/p/CaHgF_HIKVf/, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁴⁸ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXp-rjoWU8/>, last accessed June 7, 2022.

²⁴⁹ cf. Cere (2016), p. 137.

²⁵⁰ Megaphone 1 (2022).

you become heavily reliant on traditional media and the talk shows. It's mainly talk shows on three or four main platforms that would take you but since this is the election period all of these talk shows, you have to pay them in order to get on the show. And so, as a party of our size and with our financial constraints it's quite difficult to, not quite, it's very difficult to get on TV and try to reach that wide audience very quickly.²⁵¹

This fact would add them to those excluded from participating in dominant (political) institutions and in consequence make them in this regard part of the subaltern.²⁵² In turn, Megaphone states to offer a platform for the opposition parties running in the elections in May 2022, unlike the big media platforms. The coverage includes a post announcing opposition party Beirut Tuqawem's launch of electoral campaign on February 7, giving the subaltern a platform:

وهي تضم أفراداً من مجموعات ثورية شاركت في محطات سياسية عدّة ضدّ النظام، آخرها انتفاضة 17 تشرين.

*(Beirut Tuqawem comprises members of revolutionary groups that opposed the regime at several political milestones, including most recently the October 17.)*²⁵³

The launch of the coalition Sahluna Wal Jabal was also announced on Megaphone's Instagram account the same day.²⁵⁴ The publicity is an alternative way for opposition parties to communicate their message, gain popularity and to challenge the hegemony of their counterparts' visibility through media. That appears to be a counter-hegemonic move because a platform and the exposure on Megaphone's social media audience amplifies the voice of the opposition, at least among their followers.

Beyond their journalistic work at Megaphone, some members of the medium are also politically involved in opposition groups. However, this involvement paired with a positive stance towards anti-establishment groups does not grant opposition parties an uncritical coverage from Megaphone. This fact becomes clear in my first interview when my interview partner talks about providing a platform for opposition parties: "also keep that in check and being able to criticize them when needed and being able to also steer the conversation when needed and to ask tough questions."²⁵⁵ What seems a bit narrow-minded at first, can, in fact, be read as counter-hegemonic when one understands that Megaphone tests the opposition parties and the content of their program with regard to their stance towards minorities and marginalized people. Their effort aims at strengthening these groups in a society that is clearly

²⁵¹ Minteshreen 2 (2022).

²⁵² Although it must be mentioned that some people running for the independent lists or newly founded parties are also trained at elite universities or participate in other ways in the urban elite.

²⁵³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZrKEmootrZ/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁵⁴ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZrRcm0IIdn/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁵⁵ Megaphone 1 (2022).

hierarchical and discriminates against marginalized groups by law.²⁵⁶ The clear stance towards subaltern groups underlines the political dimension in their work.

Furthermore, the case of Megaphone proves that members of the middle-class or bourgeoisie can develop strong sentiments against the political parties and promote the struggle of the subaltern. The unifying moment lies in the shared battle against a discriminatory system. The revolutionary potential from within remains the same. The multiplicity inherent in the category “opposition” (or anti-establishment) can be united when alliances are formed:

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States.²⁵⁷

Although Megaphone does not aim at forming a new state alone, the totality of opposition groups shares a common vision of changing the Lebanese state from the ground. Alliances can come in as a form of counter-hegemony as I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

5.6 Stronger together – counter-hegemonic alliances

The look back at the beginnings of Megaphone stresses the importance of team play and collective actions. After the project’s beginnings “as a bunch of friends [...] we started bringing in our inner, our close circle who we trust.”²⁵⁸ The expansion brought more people to the team, although always acting according to the maxim of trust. To combine forces and to enter alliances with other actors is thus a common feature of Megaphone. Hereby, “the alliances developed in mobilizing counter-hegemony must extend beyond classes, to include various social forces,”²⁵⁹ which corresponds to my point made in the previous chapter that the Lebanese opposition holds revolutionary potential due to their multiplicity. Potential alliances can include “labor, women’s movement, the peace movement, religious groups, environmentalists, and ethnic organizations.”²⁶⁰

In the case of Megaphone, as is stated during the interviews, corporations with Legal Agenda, a “law and society knowledge producer that uses action research for social justice for Arabic

²⁵⁶ As mentioned in one of the examples in this section, migrant workers are often exploited through the sponsorship system. As another example, Palestinians do not have a right to own property or work in many jobs in Lebanon.

²⁵⁷ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 202.

²⁵⁸ Megaphone 2 (2022).

²⁵⁹ Katz (2006), p. 336.

²⁶⁰ Bocock (1986) cited in Katz (2006), p. 336.

speaking countries,”²⁶¹ or Public Work Studio, a “multidisciplinary research and design studio,”²⁶² are formed. The collaborations usually include the research findings of the partner organisation that are combined with Megaphone’s design expertise. The synergy becomes evident in the second interview: “They have the expertise, and we are kind of more into spreading. They don’t have the means to publish and get a lot of interactions. So, we kind of combine efforts.”²⁶³ The outcome can be an interview, an explanatory video, or a string of explanatory pictures posted at once.

Another form of alliance-building takes place between Megaphone and their followers. Readers are encouraged to submit hints about news or events to Megaphone’s inbox, an unusual alliance in the media sector. In contrast to that, traditional media, and the way they share their content are very linear in their consumer relation or “one-way media” as Hands calls it.²⁶⁴ Furthermore, he states that

this is not because of qualities inherent in the technology itself, but only because of the institutional context in which the technologies are deployed: the division between producers and consumers is an entirely conscious and political one.²⁶⁵

Although bigger media outlets also depend on reader submissions, it appears to be an integral part of Megaphone’s philosophy and mode of operation. As a result, the medium has a different relation to their followers which can be labelled as an alliance because it entails a mutual understanding with a common effort towards the same goal, in this case the goal is to cover news all over Lebanon. The strength of this alliance lies again in the foundation built on trust:

People know now that they can go to this platform. There is a level of familiarity and proximity with this platform, and they know that. They ask us to cover a protest, we will most likely respond positively and do it. It’s not the kind of relationship that they would have with TV’s station or newspapers or so on.²⁶⁶

Megaphone’s reporting surpasses the border of Lebanon and informs their readers about regional events, too, although in a limited capacity: “We currently cover Syria, Palestine, and the region. We have on a weekly basis some news, but it’s not as exhaustive as what we

²⁶¹ Legal Agenda (2022). *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/legal.agenda/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁶² Public Work Studio (2022). *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/publicworksstudio/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁶³ Megaphone 2 (2022).

²⁶⁴ Hands (2011), p. 50.

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Megaphone 1 (2022).

would like to have.”²⁶⁷ It is exemplary for the motivation to connect on a broader scale and reveals the understanding of shared struggles that need to be acknowledged and understood as a structural issue in order to be addressed. On February 14, Megaphone reported on demonstrations due to the rise of living costs in Southern Syria which is a topic far from new to the Lebanese.²⁶⁸ Another post from February 22 talks about sanctions against the family of Mohammed Makhoul, a Syrian businessman.²⁶⁹ Palestine is also subject to the reporting activity on a regional level, here on February 25 to inform about the release of two Palestinian prisoners on administrative detention.²⁷⁰ My first interview partner hopes for a wider coverage of the region with a more frequent reporting activity:

I also hope that we will be able to cover more the region and not just be focused on Lebanon without being a pan Arab outlet, just being able to do more of those linkages between Lebanon and its surrounding, to break conversations that are inherently regional related to social movements, related to political change, related to gender, related to the parliament, which are inherently comparative in nature and region.²⁷¹

As for the reporting on international affairs beyond the Levant, Megaphone reported on protests in Sudan in a video posted on February 5 and links it to the Lebanese experience:

طالبات السودان ينتفضن ضدّ التسترّ على الجرائم الجنسيّة، في مشهد يذكّر بالمشاركات النسويّة في الثورات من لبنان إلى السودان.

*(Sudanese students rise up against the cover-up of sexual crimes, in a scene reminiscent of revolutions, from Lebanon to Sudan.)*²⁷²

The Russian invasion in Ukraine in late February 2022 also made its way into the reporting repertoire of Megaphone. On February 22 the media outlet posted a snippet of Ukraine’s ambassador to the United Nations in which he directly addresses his Russian counterpart and condemns all Russian aggression against Ukraine.²⁷³ Two days later, the Russian invasion started and made headlines all over the world along with Megaphone’s post about it.²⁷⁴ The picture posted juxtaposes two images: one of the Russian military in Aleppo in 2016, the other of Russian military in Ukraine in 2022. It suggests a similarity between the two conflicts, the similarity consisting of the Russian army invading a foreign country. However,

²⁶⁷ ibid.

²⁶⁸ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ-Azg4IADB/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁶⁹ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaRyDtoKM7n/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁷⁰ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZiGPWPttw/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁷¹ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁷² https://www.instagram.com/p/CZms_9EMhPI/, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁷³ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaR5ceHDCFe/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁷⁴ cf. https://www.instagram.com/p/CaW9f_PqhLd/, last accessed May 20, 2022.

it should be noted that the Russian army is complicit with the Syrian government whereas the invasion in Ukraine was (and still is) ordered directly by the Kremlin in Moscow.

The war in Ukraine startled the Ukrainian community in Lebanon who initiated a demonstration in front of the Russian embassy to protest the Russian invasion.²⁷⁵ Herewith, the bloc of alliances and solidarity with other struggles has come full circle. The reporting on regional and international topics is counter-hegemonic when they cover the struggles of fellow citizens and the subaltern. Megaphone's activities reveal their positionality within the broader struggle of the citizens against the people in power and whose actions they have to bear.

5.7 How funny is counter-hegemony? Humour and mockery

At this point, I would like to elaborate on a form of counter-hegemony that I observed and that differs from the mere production and dissemination of news. It is a form of counter-hegemony that lives off the humorous posts of the medium targeting politics and politicians, topics of a current debate, the economic situation as well as structural failures of the Lebanese government. The Lebanese media outlets seem to be part of the targeted groups, too:

At the same time, I mean a big part of our production is completely directed against those media platforms. We criticize them upfront; we ridicule them [...]. On a weekly basis you have a piece on Megaphone that criticizes those platforms.²⁷⁶

Efharis Mascha comments on the topic of political satire and popular culture in Mussolini's Italy and sees mockery as an act of counter-hegemony. She observes that "laughing at the dominant order, if nothing else, gives a great sense of freedom to the subordinate."²⁷⁷ Cartoons or short stories in pictures come in as a simple means to communicate a message. The intellectual activity turns the creator into an organic intellectual, "autonomous and independent from the dominant group and aiming at educating and organising the avantguard."²⁷⁸ The creator's role can also be politically educative of the subaltern class, or, in the case of Lebanon, everybody opposed to the current circumstances and those

²⁷⁵ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXx66BLbAe/>, last accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁷⁶ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁷⁷ Mascha, Efharis (2011). Mocking Fascism: Popular culture and political satire as counter-hegemony. In: Billy Tsakōna and Diana Elena Popa (eds.). *Studies in political humour: In between political critique and public entertainment*. Discourse approaches to politics, society, and culture, volume 46, pp. 191–213. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 200.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 197.

responsible.²⁷⁹ As an effect, it contributes to the self-identification and self-determination of a certain social group, namely the group opposed to the dominant social order.

Examples for this practice is a series with the title لا تعليق (“No Comment”). Mostly, the posts are video snippets from interviews or TV shows. The title is the sole description of the video, relying on the collective understanding of the humour intended. The humour derives from the pervasive failure of the government. The series “No Comment” serves as an instrument to mock the people or the content of the posts in order to regain a sense of agency, thus countering the hegemony of the narratives that were implied in the first case. An example for the “No Comment” series poses the snippet from a TV show in which the host asks the panel which form of violence against women can be tolerated.²⁸⁰ The lack of explanation or title plays with the audience in a way that it includes the understanding user as part of a group that understands the matter or matters that are self-evident. Humour and its instruments invoke

affective bonding between the humorous persons and the recipients of their humour, in addition to buttressing others’ familiarity with their personhood, opinions and political inclinations.²⁸¹

In this case, it should be self-evident not to hit women hence the needlessness of the question in the first place. The description of this snippet “No Comment” counters the hegemonic narrative of women’s subordination in society and misogynist trends inherent in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the latter aspect of buttressing political inclinations aligns with the overall aim of Megaphone to create a platform for people with shared political views and to educate people about the current social, political, and economic developments in Lebanon.

In another example the framing of “No Comment” is meant in a clearly sarcastic way: Energy minister Walid Fayad talks about raising the hours of government electricity supply in a short video.²⁸² The fact that the government failed to provide a functioning electricity infrastructure in the past years rendered the Lebanese population disaffected about any new promises. Therefore, the announcement by the Minister of Energy is met by sarcasm and ridicules the minister which, as a consequence, reveals his incompetence with regard to the ongoing electricity cuts in the country.

²⁷⁹ cf. *ibid.*

²⁸⁰ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZwe4BLMBvm/>, last accessed May 23, 2022.

²⁸¹ Kazarian, Shahe S. (2011). Humor in the collectivist Arab Middle East: The case of Lebanon. *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 24 (3). 10.1515/humr.2011.020, p. 342.

²⁸² cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ9j63YvnFa/>, last accessed May 23, 2022.

A short story with the title *أشرار بالصدفة* (“Villains by chance”) stood out as an outright piece of mockery of Lebanese politicians.²⁸³ The short story consists of four slides depicting a fictitious conversation between the Minister of Energy Walid Fayad, Minister of Labour Moustafa Bayram, Minister of Industry George Boujikian, and Minister of Economy Amin Salam. The short conversation covers the plans of the Minister of Electricity to provide electricity, the demolishing of the port silos, and closes with the suggestion to go to a restaurant in Hamra. The disclaimer reads: “This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental,”²⁸⁴ yet another notion of mockery in this post. Mockery questions the competences of the politicians and states a withdrawal of support for the people depicted.



Figure 3: Short story as an example of sarcasm on Megaphone’s Instagram channel.²⁸⁵

Mockery is an act of counter-hegemony because “laughter escapes social control and the order of the power bloc,”²⁸⁶ thereby unveiling the social tensions and contestations within society. It also contributes to the formation of a common sense within the group that shares the same laughter,²⁸⁷ because “political satire challenges common sense attitudes and

²⁸³ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaC1v11tmCO/>, last accessed May 23, 2022.

²⁸⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaC123WNANP/>, last accessed June 27, 2022.

²⁸⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaC1v11tmCO/>, last accessed June 27, 2022.

²⁸⁶ Mascha (2011), p. 200.

²⁸⁷ cf. *ibid.*

preconceptions of the world. It reverses the world created by the dominant order.”²⁸⁸ Additionally, humour can play a role in the process of adjustment and coping after stressful life events.²⁸⁹ A sociological study about humour and resilience after natural or technological disasters indicates that

coping with humor was positively and independently associated with resilience. [...] the present study is the first to show that coping with humor is associated with resilience after multiple disasters, confirming the benefit of humor for adaptive coping in the years after these events.²⁹⁰

The Lebanese population has suffered from various disasters in the past decades, a civil war of 15 years, economic and political crises, as well as most recently the Covid-19 pandemic and the port blast in August 2020. The humorous content on Megaphone’s social media channels mirrors the effort to process the struggle and to regain some form of agency in order to cope with the events that affected the population and left their marks.

This chapter traced the various ways in which Megaphone counters the hegemony of the bigger media outlets in Lebanon, their narrative production, and, by that, indirectly the hegemony of the affiliated political parties. My analysis is supported by the diverse aspects of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, as outlined in the sections of this chapter. As a Marxist, Gramsci also elaborated on the subject of revolution which is going to be the focus of the next chapter.

6 Talking revolution – from upheaval back to the status quo?

Gramsci dedicated a good amount of his thoughts to societal change and thereby to revolution. The act of revolution is as much a topic in the *Prison Notebooks* as is the concept of passive revolution. This chapter focuses on both forms of revolution: first, on the active revolution in Lebanon in 2019, and how it was a catalyst to Megaphone and its work; second, on Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution, how it applies to the case of Lebanon and how Megaphone reacts to it.

²⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁸⁹ cf. Cherry, Katie E; Sampson, Laura; Galea, Sandro; Marks, Loren D; Stanko, Katie E; Nezat, Pamela F; Baudoin, Kayla H. (2018). Spirituality, Humor, and Resilience After Natural and Technological Disasters. *Journal of nursing scholarship an official publication of Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing* 50 (5): 492–501. 10.1111/jnu.12400, p. 497.

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*

6.1 Megaphone and the October revolution

In October 2019, the Lebanese population took to the streets and demanded the resignation of the government and the initiation of new reforms to improve the general living conditions in Lebanon.²⁹¹ The revolution was superseded by a counter-revolution and Lebanon is since stuck in a status quo with international demands to reforms falling on deaf ears.²⁹² It was during this time, that the course of events propelled a development within Megaphone from volunteer-based, semi-professional to a professional, full-time structure. Initially, Megaphone started as an experiment, or as a lab, with none of the founding members as a journalist in training, on the contrary, their backgrounds being of design, political sciences, or engineering.²⁹³ From the beginning until the revolution in 2019, the main goal consisted of making

politics interesting and to have young people get less intimidated about engaging with political content online. And feel way more empowered in talking about these issues [...] So, it was about creating interest and providing a platform for engagement and debate.²⁹⁴

Already in 2018, the medium experienced a first wave of growth when they covered the parliamentary elections and informed many people from their target group about the electoral system, the different candidates, the lists, and finally the outcome. In October 2019 with the outbreak of the revolution, “it completely boomed and became [...] one of the main platforms for young people to follow.”²⁹⁵ From this moment on, the prominent task

became about documenting the uprising, keeping a camera in the street, making sure that violations are documented, challenging the official narratives, deconstructing them and informing more importantly about the economic collapse and what it means and all the decisions that have been taken by the government, informing also about protesters’ rights and violations that are being committed, all putting the floor for writers, young writers, activists to also express themselves to the articles, opinion articles, and really tap into their political imagination of how they could reimagine the kind of contribute they would like to build.²⁹⁶

The correlation between the boom of Megaphone’s popularity and the October revolution becomes evident. The medium took advantage of the moment to become widely known

²⁹¹ See section 3.1.

²⁹² cf. World Bank (2021). *The Great Denial. Lebanon Economic Monitor*. Washington DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36862> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

²⁹³ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁹⁴ *ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*

among the Lebanese social media landscape and a reliable news source for protesters.²⁹⁷ The ongoing coverage of the events in the street demanded full dedication of the team and a constant workflow which led to the professionalization of the working structure. Fundraising and the presence of “two senior journalists who had joined the project right before the uprising and who had experience in running a newsroom and working in more traditional settings”²⁹⁸ facilitated the transition to what Megaphone is today. My interview partner described the structure to be very dynamic and functioning in a way that is similar to start-ups that is by now an institutionalized full-time model.²⁹⁹

After the boom of the revolution came what my interview partner termed as a counter-revolution and a crackdown on revolutionary activities.³⁰⁰ Along with this development, the medium’s content shifted once more towards social transformations that expanded after the financial and economic collapse, the port blast, the political developments, and the election process,³⁰¹ in short, reporting activity. On the other hand, he underlines the potential of Megaphone “to provide a platform for political imagination and [...] a platform for people who have new ideas about how it can be organized and popularized.”³⁰²

6.2 From active to passive revolution

If the October revolution happened out of a spontaneous moment or if it was preceded by structural prepositions that led to the uprising is not the focus of this analysis. However, Gramsci states in his writings about *Spontaneity and Conscious Leadership* that pure spontaneity cannot exist in history.³⁰³ Uprisings and revolutions are more than an impulsive outbreak of well-defined reasons at that specific time of upheaval. Revolutions can be framed as a disruption in the mechanisms of power that lay bare the potential of the revolutionaries and the crisis of hegemony. The following quote from the *Prison Notebooks* shows the accuracy of Gramsci’s considerations to the case of Lebanon:

the content is the crisis of the ruling class’s hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example), or

²⁹⁷ cf. Minteshreen 2 (2022).

²⁹⁸ Megaphone 1 (2022).

²⁹⁹ cf. *ibid.*

³⁰⁰ cf. *ibid.*

³⁰¹ cf. *ibid.*

³⁰² *ibid.*

³⁰³ cf. Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 430ff.

because huge masses (especially of peasants and petit-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A ‘crisis of authority’ is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State.³⁰⁴

The reaction of power mechanisms in place were quick to get going during the days of revolution in the streets. Instead of consent, it was the coercive side that was put into action. Reporters Without Borders observed that “attacks on the media have intensified during the demonstrations. The police have used disproportionate force against journalists and have attacked them although they were clearly identifiable as such.”³⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the October revolution was a crisis of hegemony. While the traditional media outlets simply did not report about the protests in the streets and failed to address the change in environment, their hegemony in the media landscape was questioned. In contrast to that, mediums such as Megaphone experienced a boom and their counter-hegemonic activities gained momentum during the uprisings.

While parts of the government back in October 2019 resigned,³⁰⁶ the political crisis continued, worsened, and soon turned into an economic crisis. The protest movement slowed down and the old status-quo was stabilized in the form of a “counter-revolution,”³⁰⁷ as my first interview partner coined it. To speak with Gramsci, a passive revolution took place. However,

as a concept, passive revolution signifies not a type of capitalist transition or a ‘middle road’ between revolution and counter-revolution, but a way of understanding successful, stable, and lasting restorations of dominant class power.”³⁰⁸

In contrast to the active revolution that was present in the streets and carried by civil society as well as parts of political society, passive revolution is marked by the absence of protest:

Gramsci developed the concept of passive revolution to function as a criterion for the interpretation of the absence of permanent revolution [...], underlining the agility of ruling classes, the flexibility of capitalism, and the leading role of state power in displacing popular initiative.³⁰⁹

Over time, Gramsci used the expression of passive revolution in two slightly differing ways, the first as a revolution without the participation of the masses, and the second “as a

³⁰⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 450–451.

³⁰⁵ Reporters Without Borders (2022).

³⁰⁶ Centre for Lebanese Studies (n/a). *Lebanon’s “October Revolution”: An end to the civil war?* <https://lebanesestudies.com/papers/lebanons-october-revolution-an-end-to-the-civil-war/>, last accessed June 15, 2022.

³⁰⁷ Megaphone 1 (2022).

³⁰⁸ de Smet (2016), p. 224.

³⁰⁹ *ibid.*

‘molecular’ social transformation which takes place as it were beneath the surface of society, in situations where the progressive class cannot advance openly.”³¹⁰ In that sense, it is a transformation from above, initiated by the political society that is driven by its aim to maintain power in society. Passive revolution, as I employ the term in this analysis, entails the constant process to develop the hegemonic instruments in place or new hegemonic instruments. The mechanisms of a passive revolution infiltrate the media sector, too, I conclude, after having shown the interrelations between the media sector and the political society in section 4.2. Therefore, passive revolution poses an adaptable instrument to trace the non-active transformations in society and the state as a whole.

There are two factors I would like to discuss regarding Megaphone and the passive revolution. First, Megaphone did not support the restoration of the government and did not participate in the adaptation of media as a hegemonic instrument. Second, and contrary to the first point, Megaphone actively reported on the revolution, and dismantles acts of passive revolution as well as it holds the government accountable. The following selection from February’s posts depicts the diverse attempts of Lebanese politicians for a passive revolution to their benefit.

The first topic to be examined here is related to the finance sector which was a constant topic in February’s coverage. On February 4, Megaphone posted a video about governmental measurements that are intended to revive the financial sector which, however, could worsen the inflation as a side effect as the news outlet observes.³¹¹ The measurements can be seen as an instrument serving the political class to stabilize their rule and to show cosmetic actions without any real effects in an ongoing financial crisis. Furthermore, on February 7, Megaphone published news about the rejection of the association of banks of the new governmental financial plan. Suspected reasons for the rejection are two-fold:

وقد نذرَعت الجمعية بأنَّ الخطة ستؤدي إلى خسارة الثقة بمستقبل القطاع المصرفي، غير أنَّ السبب الفعلي لتحقّطات الجمعية قد يكون سعي الخطة إلى اقتطاع نحو 13 مليار دولار من أسهم أصحاب المصارف.

*(The association argued that the plan will lead to a loss of confidence in the future of the banking sector, but the actual reason for the association's reservations may have to do with the plan to deduct about \$13 billion from bank owners' shares.)*³¹²

The element of passive revolution observed here lies in the aspect to recover the banking sector with the help of depositors’ funds without giving them a choice. The ignorance to adapt new reforms to secure both the finance sector and the depositors’ funds and the absence of

³¹⁰ Hoare and Nowell Smith (1999), p. 194.

³¹¹ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZkNZc-t9Ja/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³¹² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZr2h4btseA/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

accountability are witness to the hegemonic project of the political class and their intent to secure power, influence, and maintain the status quo. Another post from February 11 is further proof to this development in the finance sector. The post announces the approval of the budget by the government and the important detail that, despite the ongoing crisis and banks withholding money from depositors, the plan “includes continuing payments of public debt interests to the banking sector. These benefits constitute 80% of the value of the budget deficit of LBP 8,000 billion.”³¹³ It becomes evident that the government values the payments of public debt interest to the banking sector higher than their support to depositors and their subsistence at stake. Megaphone obtained a copy of the government’s budget plan and published the main propositions of interest to the citizens in a post on February 14. Furthermore, the medium states that the International Monetary Fund left the government of prime minister Najib Mikati without approval of the plan. The slides published on Instagram break down which amount of deposit at Lebanese banks meet which consequence, for example, deposits up between \$150.000 – \$500.000 are supposed to be paid in Lebanese Pounds with the exchange rate of \$1 = LBP 20.000, whereas interests paid since 2015 are paid with the exchange rate of \$1 = LBP 5.000. Other tricks to shift the consequences of the financial crisis to the bank clients are explained.³¹⁴ The medium continues to trace the amendments of the government’s budget plans on February 22, however, coming to the same result as before:

وتبينت أولويات الحكومة بشكل واضح وموسّع بالأرقام: إنقاذ القطاع المصرفي، بعيداً عن أي تعافي مالي فعلي.

*(and the government's priorities were clearly detailed in numbers: Saving the banking sector, without any actual financial recovery.)*³¹⁵

The finance sector ran the risk of being associated with cases of corruption. The current Governor of Lebanon’s central bank, Banque du Liban, Riad Salameh is currently accused of corruption in an ongoing investigation that also attracts the attention of international actors. Megaphone reported on an investigation initiated by authorities in Luxembourg to look into Salameh’s assets on February 5.

يُعتبر هذا التحقيق الثالث من نوعه، إذ يُضاف إلى التحقيقات الجارية في كلٍّ من فرنسا وسويسرا بالأصول التي يملكها سلامة في أوروبا، بينما لا تزال المصارف اللبنانية تغطّي على الحاكم وتعرقل محاولة القاضي جان طنّوس ملاحقته قضائياً.

(This is the third investigation of its kind, added to the ongoing investigations in France and Switzerland into assets owned by Salameh in Europe. Meanwhile, Lebanese banks are still

³¹³ https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ14jWsM_BX/, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³¹⁴ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ93r0YowDT/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaSJ9fAKymk/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

covering up for the governor and obstructing Judge Jean Tannous' attempt to prosecute him.)³¹⁶

This is followed by a fourth request for judicial cooperation submitted by Germany, as Megaphone reports three days later. The description of the case reveals the element of passive revolution that blocked the investigations at the time of my research:

تجدر الإشارة إلى أنّ المصارف اللبنانية تتذرع بـ«قانون السرية المصرفية» للامتناع عن تسليم المعلومات للمحققين الأوروبيين، رغم أنّ قانون السرية المصرفية لا يحمي المتهمين بـ«الإثراء غير المشروع».

(Lebanese banks have been invoking the “banking secrecy law” to withhold information from European investigators, although this law does not apply to those accused of illicit enrichment.)³¹⁷

A last post from February 25 adds another layer to the case when it becomes clear that several banks and persons have been involved as well as the fact that Salameh attempted to conceal his identity, all signs of passive revolution:

وطالبت المجموعتان هيئة الرقابة السويسرية بالتحقيق في الدور الذي لعبته البنوك الثلاثة في تسهيل عملية تبييض الأموال واستقبال أموال حاكم مصرف لبنان رياض سلامة والمقربين منه وسيااسيين ومصرفيين لبنانيين آخرين حصلوا على أموالهم عبر «ممارسات الفساد». واعتبرت المجموعتان أنّ هذه البنوك «تخطت الخطوط الحمراء» وسهّلت تحويلات مالية مشبوهة لسلامة الذي حاول إخفاء هويته.

(The two groups requested that FINMA investigate these three banks for their role in facilitating money laundering and receiving funds “which appear to be ill-gotten and derived from corruption” from Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh and those close to him, as well as Lebanese politicians, bankers and others. They stated that “all red flags [...] are met” in these operations, such as banks facilitating Salameh’s suspicious money transfers, or the governor attempting to conceal his identity.)³¹⁸

Another video reveals the complicity of numerous actors in the “political, judicial, media and sectarian sector”³¹⁹ in guarding the governor and preventing a successful investigation, thus strengthening the transformation towards a system in support of its elite. The case is deeply entrenched in the political landscape of Lebanon, as becomes evident with the next post from February 16:

ادّعت القاضية غادة عون على المدير العام لقوى الأمن الداخلي عماد عثمان، اليوم الثلاثاء، على خلفية منعه تنفيذ مذكرة إحضار حاكم مصرف لبنان رياض سلامة، أمس الإثنين.

[...] وقد غُلِّقت الخطوة هذه بقلب الصراع بين التيار الوطني الحر وتيار المستقبل على مشارف الانتخابات، إذ أيد فريق رئاسة الجمهورية مساعي القاضية عون، فيما هاجم تيار المستقبل هذه الخطوة، مشدداً على «أن محاولة النيل من اللواء عماد عثمان لن تمرّ مهما جيّشوا إلى ذلك سبيلاً.»

³¹⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZl8QxAKRJM/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³¹⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZt1Zboqt8B/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZfF5NoCAz/>, last accessed June 9, 2022.

³¹⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZwzzsEqiMW/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

(Judge Ghada Aoun pressed charges against ISF Director-General Major General Imad Osman on Tuesday, after he refused to execute Riad Salameh's subpoena on Monday. [...])

*This step is at the heart of the conflict between the Free Patriotic Movement and the Future Movement on the eve of elections, as the pro-president team supports Judge Aoun's efforts, while the Future Movement condemned this step, stressing that "the attempt to undermine Maj. Gen. Imad Osman will not pass no matter how hard they try."*³²⁰

This case is exemplary for the intertwined political and economic interests of the political society. Although the passive transformation towards a continued beneficial environment is in both parties' interest, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Future Movement have differing stances, each with their own motivations. It shows that the political society is a heterogeneous class, except for their shared interest for power.

Another topic frequently addressed in February is the demolishing of the silos in the port area of Beirut that were closest to the blast in August 2020 and consequently destroyed by the shockwave. The ruins of the silos have been abandoned since and tower over the fallow land without a decision for the future of the construction. A Swiss company concluded its report about the remaining ruins with a recommendation to demolish the silos due to their instability as they slowly tilt.³²¹ Megaphone argues from another point of view and states in a post from February 11 that "the authorities are tampering with the crime scene, and targeting what remains of the grain silos in the port of Beirut, after they destroyed the city."³²² The medium claims on February 15 that the government is "overlooking recommendations to restore or preserve the scene of an unfinished crime" and "is promoting the most lucrative option."³²³ Two aspects are notable about these postings. First, the tone is outrightly opposing the government's considerations. Words such as "tampering" or "crime scene" suggest the explicit positioning of Megaphone on that matter, accusing the government of profit-making and calling them out on their responsibility for the port blast, thus siding with the victims of the port blast and the survivors. Second, the act would pose a continuity in a row of demolitions that occurred after the civil war. Megaphone puts it as follows:

³²⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaC4DvAopNo/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²¹ cf. Chehayeb, Kareem (February 22, 2022). Beirut blast survivors say demolishing grain silos an 'injustice'. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/22/beirut-blast-survivors-say-demolishing-grain-silos-an>, last accessed July 2, 2022.

³²² https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ1St_ULVSY/, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaAbGOvoR11/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

ليست المرة الأولى التي يسارع خلالها المسؤولون لاعتماد هذا الخيار. فقد اجتاحت بيروت منذ انتهاء الحرب الأهلية موجات هدم عدّة، طالت مباني ذات قيمة تراثية أو عمرانية أو مباني شكّلت جزءاً من الذاكرة الجماعية وامتلكت قيمة أكبر من المشاريع الاستهلاكية التي أنشئت فوق أنقاض المدينة.³²⁴

*(This is not the first time that officials have rushed to choose this option. Since the end of the Civil War, several demolition waves have swept Beirut. Buildings were destroyed that had historical or urban value, or that were part of the collective memory and possessed greater value than the consumer projects that were built on the city's ruins.)*³²⁵

Demolitions are allegedly a common option for the political society to alter the public sphere and thereby influencing the collective memory. I see it as an act of passive revolution to transform the public space that mirrors failures and neglect of the past. Public space is as much subject to politics as is for example the media. The communicated disapproval of Megaphone shows their opposition to the passive revolution in terms of the port blast and with regard to the silos. At the end of the month, on February 22, Minister of Economy Amin Salam tones down his position towards the demolition and stresses several options regarding the future of the silos, including the preservation.³²⁶ In addition to the destruction of the port silos, the liquidation of the company responsible for bringing the ammonium nitrate to the port can be seen as an act of passive revolution, too.³²⁷

The collaborative video posted February 26 about the repertoire of the political parties to stay in power that I previously discussed in section 5.4 about common sense, can be seen as an act of counter-hegemony against the process of passive revolution, too. The video sheds light on the various tricks at hand for the political parties to secure their seats in the parliamentary elections in May 2022.³²⁸ It is, firstly, the act to identify the mechanisms of passive revolution, and secondly, the resulting transformation of the common sense that are counter-hegemonic steps.

Noteworthy is another post from February 23 in which Megaphone informs about the approval of 13 laws which are important tools in the fight against monopolies and their dictation of prices, a law particularly important in light of the economic crisis in Lebanon. The delicate detail about the approval Megaphone refers to, are different clauses that were included by deputies and that are meant to reduce the impact of the laws.³²⁹ These amendments pose another example of the passive revolution of the Lebanese political society

³²⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaAa478qvgd/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaAbGOvoR11/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²⁶ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaaKgbLtUs0/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²⁷ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaSS0koLWSY/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²⁸ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CacfoEMo9pi/>, last accessed May 24, 2022.

³²⁹ cf. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaU0CxEIHzH/>, last accessed June 15, 2022.

taking place to protect certain powers and backdoors for their own advantages. As before, the reporting activity is an act of counter-hegemony.

Megaphone challenges and contests the process of passive revolution in the Lebanese media landscape by interrupting the ever pervasive and pervading transformation. The medium offers an alternative narrative and supports oppositional views that are not necessarily reflected in the mainstream media. Until today, Megaphone continues to withstand the transformation of the passive revolution.

The distinction between ruling class and the subaltern in the Gramscian sense is not easily applicable to the case of passive revolution in Lebanon. As discussed in the previous chapters, the people that form Megaphone come from an elitist background themselves. For the case study, I see this circumstance as a strength because it offers certain resources to contest the passive revolution.

However, another notion in the relation between Megaphone and the ruling class should be discussed which addresses the stabilization of the latter by allowing some form of counter-hegemony and dissent. Katz puts hegemony and counter-hegemony in an interdependent relation and not in opposition to each other. Therefore, both stabilize and nurture each other. In a system without hegemony, counter-hegemony becomes redundant or cannot emerge in the first place. Katz elaborates on the subject:

Hegemony necessitates counter-hegemony—hegemony and counter-hegemony are best seen as ‘simultaneous double movements’ that reciprocally shape one another—hegemony informs counter-hegemony, and counter-hegemonic efforts cause hegemonic forces to realign and reorganize themselves.³³⁰

Furthermore, the author claims that this allowance becomes an instrument for a passive revolution by allowing a minor form of dissent within the system in order to maintain the continued consent to the current relations of force.³³¹ This may be true, however, the growth in numbers on Megaphone’s platforms suggest a certain openness and ongoing support from within the Lebanese community. Although Lebanon’s society is extremely split between the rich and the poor, it is still based on a democratic constitution. The outcome of the parliamentary elections in May 2022 are proof to the growing influence of parties outside the traditional political party spectrum. Also, as Kate Crehan argues,

the narratives that become hegemonic are those that reflect the world as seen from the vantage point of the rulers rather than the ruled, those that challenge the hegemonic

³³⁰ Katz (2006), p. 336.

³³¹ cf. *ibid.*, p. 335.

narratives from an outside location are forced to exist within the interstices of the dominant explanations.³³²

Hegemony and, conversely, counter-hegemony are both processes of negotiation, consent, and continuous dissent.³³³ In the specific case of Megaphone as part of the Lebanese media landscape, I focus on the counter-hegemonic potential the medium, its ideological background, its actions, and its use of social media platforms hold. After the thorough examination of Megaphone's diverse approaches to counter hegemony in the Lebanese media landscape, I would like to discuss one of their unique features in the next chapter: their use of social media as their main platform for dissemination.

7 Social media: platform, tool, discursive space

Social media and its features were briefly introduced in section 3.3. After the analysis of Megaphone, counter-hegemony, and revolution in the previous chapters, it is time to focus on social media and its features as the main platform for news dissemination. I start with a general overview of social media in times of upheaval and the role it plays for protest. Afterwards, I discuss the potential and the limits of social media. This is followed by an elaboration on alternative journalism which attempts to examine if this framework is applicable to Megaphone's work. The last section argues that Megaphone revolutionizes news production on social media and underlines how this is an act of counter-hegemony.

7.1 The role of social media for protest

An important feature of social media is to “facilitate social interaction, the sharing of digital media, and collaboration.”³³⁴ The offline social networks that are translated online are important to social media due to their property to disseminate.³³⁵ This feature becomes particularly important during times of upheaval. A striking example of social media and protest is the demonstrations that followed the presidential elections in Iran in 2009. The page of Twitter was supposed to be shut down for a short period of time due to maintenance work,

³³² Crehan (2016), p. 51.

³³³ cf. Cere (2016), p. 127.

³³⁴ Murthy (2012), p. 1061.

³³⁵ cf. *ibid.*

but Twitter's management postponed it in order for protesters to organize and continue using the platform for mobilization and interaction.³³⁶ Apparently, Twitter played a major role during the protests or at least ascribed itself a fair share of importance to it. In another case, in late 2010, demonstrators took to the streets in Tunisia to protest the self-immolation of a fruit vendor whose goods were confiscated by the local police. The protest movement soon spread over the country, reached the capital Tunis, and led to the ousting of the president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after his autocratic reign of 23 years.³³⁷ The protests spilled over to other North African countries as well as other countries of West Asia. A characteristic most of the protests shared, was mobilization via social media sites. "The precise mixture of causes may have varied from country to country, but the one consistent component has been digital media,"³³⁸ write Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain. AlSayyad and Guvenc confirm this observation stating that each movement had its own local, specific root causes, however, it should be noted that "the ripple effect that tied the countries [...] together, and the importance of social media in enabling it, cannot be dismissed."³³⁹

In that sense, social media became a facilitator of protests. However, social media should be understood as a digital means of transportation of actual demands. Wolfsfeld et al. comment that "a significant increase in the use of the new media is much more likely to follow a significant amount of protest activity than to precede it,"³⁴⁰ thus opposing the idea that social media solely sparks protests in the digital age. This circumstance applies to the case of Lebanon almost ten years later. The protest movement was sparked by the announcement to impose a tax on internet-based calls and quickly addresses more structural issues. To explore the question of social media's role in protest movements, I turn to Sidney Tarrow whose contribution can offer significant hints towards an answer.

Contentious politics is produced when political opportunities broaden, when they demonstrate the potential for alliances, and when they reveal the opponents' vulnerability. Contention crystallizes into a social movement when it taps embedded social networks and connective structures and produces collective action frames and supportive identities able to sustain contention with powerful opponents. By mounting familiar forms of contention, movements become focal points that transform external opportunities into resources. Repertoires of contention, social networks, and cultural frames lower the costs of bringing people into collective action, induce confidence that they are not alone, and give broader meaning to their claims. Together, these factors

³³⁶ cf. Hands (2011), p. 1.

³³⁷ cf. Schraeder, Peter J; Redissi, Hamadi (2011). Ben Ali's Fall. *Journal of Democracy* 22 (3): 5–19. 10.1353/jod.2011.0047, p. 5ff.

³³⁸ Howard and Hussain (2011), p. 41.

³³⁹ AlSayyad and Guvenc (2015), p. 2024.

³⁴⁰ Wolfsfeld et al. (2013), p. 120.

trigger the dynamic processes that have made social movements historically central to political and social change.³⁴¹

The quote unfolds many layers of social movement and protests for which reason I reproduced it in full length. The first characteristic addresses the broadening of political opportunities. Social media can be a space to communicate demands and to mobilize for action. Since social media is an open space and visible for a broad public, the coverage of the events from a protester's perspective—be it user-based content or media coverage—opens up the opportunity for change and the possibility for political demands to be heard. Social media plays, hereby, the role of a transmitter and channels the point of view of the many. Secondly, social media and especially social network sites are a tool to communicate alliances with other protest movements. Joint statements can precede joint actions in the streets which corresponds to the first point of broadened political opportunities that might arise by forming alliances.

Social media can also reveal the opponent's vulnerability when reports about wrongdoings of the political opponent become public on pages such as WikiLeaks. Another example that corresponds to the Lebanese media sphere is Thawra Map, an Instagram account that publishes the photos and videos of important political figures spotted in public, and sometimes even the confrontation of citizens with them. Although Megaphone never defined a political opponent and instead referred to the "establishment" as a whole,³⁴² its activities itself can be seen as an act to counter the hegemony of political parties and the affiliated media outlets, thereby exposing the vulnerability of them.

Going back to social media in general, it can further fuel social protest movements because it reproduces embedded social networks and produces new connective structures that can result in collective action frames, such as updates on Twitter about protests and police violence, hashtags to facilitate finding posts referring to a topic, events on Facebook, donation collection via stickers on Instagram Stories, and so on. My first interview partner from Minteshreen remembers the first days of protests back in October 2019 when the political party was still a loose group of people: "We were using WhatsApp, we were using Instagram, we were using Facebook, we were using Twitter, all the platforms."³⁴³ Her statement confirms the normality of social media channels that are regularly employed for protests nowadays.

³⁴¹ Tarrow, Sidney (2012). *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*: Cambridge University Press, p. 23.

³⁴² cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022).

³⁴³ Minteshreen 1 (2022).

As another instrument in the repertoire of contention, I suggest the consideration of mediums such as Megaphone. According to their own information, they grew immensely during the October revolution in 2019, and covered the protests in depth. As a platform, they “enable citizens to take action and ‘speak critically to power’”³⁴⁴ by putting social media at their own service and continue to do so until today. The young and “the more technologically savvy [...] are usually at the forefront of using new media as a means for expressing their various political demands,”³⁴⁵ which is quite the case for the Lebanese revolution. Media coverage and equally social media coverage is vital for the protests to document the protest itself, to have a record of violations of fundamental rights. Moreover, “media coverage of certain events often defines the events themselves and brings them into being.”³⁴⁶ Without the coverage the events itself can be questioned, doubted, and even contested. Furthermore, the (social) media coverage gives meaning to the events, meaning that the protesters need in order to continue to fight. However, to return to Tarrow, “the power to trigger sequences of collective action is not the same as the power to control or sustain them.”³⁴⁷ The potential of social media to trigger protests should not distract from the fact that profound societal and political change needs a more systemic approach to the roots of contention and unrest.

To conclude, “by ignoring [social media] and its potential ability to trigger social change, [...] we are deliberately overlooking a vital piece of today’s political space.”³⁴⁸ Much is happening on social media that affects the political discourse and translates to the social sphere and leads eventually to structural changes. The assessment of social media and its role for social transformations must include a discussion of the potentials as well as the limitations.

7.2 The potential and the limits of social media

Social media is part of our everyday lives and has shaped our relation to the internet as part of society and revolutionized the way we communicate with each other. As much as it bears potential for change, the digital realm, and subsequently social media, has its limits. This

³⁴⁴ Housley, William; Webb, Helena; Williams, Meredydd; Procter, Rob; Edwards, Adam; Jirotko, Marina; Burnap, Pete; Stahl, Bernd Carsten; Rana, Omer; Williams, Matthew (2018). Interaction and Transformation on Social Media: The Case of Twitter Campaigns. *Social Media + Society* 4 (1): 205630511775072. 10.1177/2056305117750721, p. 2.

³⁴⁵ Ang et al. (2014), p. 1232.

³⁴⁶ AlSayyad and Guvenc (2015), p. 2028.

³⁴⁷ Tarrow (2012), p. 23.

³⁴⁸ Tkacheva, Olesya (2013). *Internet freedom & political space*. RAND Corporation research report series, RR295. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, p. 72.

section discusses the potentials and limits of social media to fathom the potential social media platforms contain for Megaphone to reach its audience.

7.2.1 Potential

For a decade and a bit more, social media has been the subject of scientific research. It is praised for its “openness, directness, and democracy,”³⁴⁹ and also for transparency, and support of low-threshold exchange of information and ideas.³⁵⁰ Bosch’s observation on Twitter is interesting to read:

While youth may not regularly consume mainstream news media, Twitter offers an element of immediacy, existing in parallel with more traditional news platforms, and giving them a vehicle for political participation.³⁵¹

However, the element of immediacy should be seen with caution since immediacy can potentially compromise on the accuracy of information that is being shared.

Furthermore, social media shows “great promise for reconfiguring of the structure of political discourses towards a broadening of public debate by facilitating social connectivity.”³⁵² The participation in public debates is a direct result of re-appropriating the public sphere and, by that, it can pose a factor for societal change. For instance, users are able to post and share critical content on social media with such an immediacy that critical incidents can be reported in a timely manner and reach the audience before becoming outdated.³⁵³ Furthermore, social media holds the capacity for multi-directional communication and information dissemination, and facilitated “coordination between actors on a scale and within a time-frame impossible prior to the emergence of such technology.”³⁵⁴

The constant flow of information and its immediacy is probably the greatest feature of social media. The way information is being disseminated, has shaped a generation of media consumers. Since various protest movements all over the world have taken advantage of the technological innovations of our time, “the new media has the potential to change the political socialization patterns of teenagers and is affecting the way they think and perceive the world

³⁴⁹ Housley et al. (2018), p. 2.

³⁵⁰ cf. Mairedder and Ausserhofer (2014) cited in Chiluwa, Bouvier (2019), p. vii.

³⁵¹ Bosch (2017), p. 230.

³⁵² *ibid.*

³⁵³ cf. Housley et al. (2018), p. 2.

³⁵⁴ Hands (2011), pp. 50–51.

and are mobilized.”³⁵⁵ By now the youth (up until the age of 35) was and still is potentially politicized and sometimes mobilized in some forms on social media platforms since social media has been part of our lives for years. This raw material of politicized youths, as Raimund Minichbauer labels it, can serve for formative processes in social movements.³⁵⁶

With the Lebanese media being biased and affiliated with the political parties, the Lebanese youth found another way to become politically active by mastering social media and embracing it as a vehicle to articulate political demands. The October revolution gave this process more momentum and boosted accounts such as Megaphone.

7.2.2 Limits

To all the potential that social media holds as a driver for change, the limits should not be overlooked. First of all, access to social media through a digital device is not universally guaranteed, thus questioning the accessibility that is imperative for a democratic environment online.³⁵⁷ My interview partners were all aware of the unequal distribution of internet accessibility which deepens pre-existing social inequalities.³⁵⁸

Secondly, widespread access to social media does not result in immediate media literacy. Misinformation can spread rapidly, and fake news is as common as real news nowadays. The call on “educational, civic and media institutions [to] improve media literacy to enable those addressed to have a deeper perception of what they hear, watch and read”³⁵⁹ gets louder. This aligns with what the social media analyst warned of during our interview. Media literacy must become the subject of a more in-depth discussion on online communication culture. Otherwise, he states, media illiteracy could become a tool to serve non-democratic forces to spread their opinion.³⁶⁰ Observers of the October revolution Karim Merhej and Elina Qureshi comment:

³⁵⁵ Maamari, Bassem E; Zein, Hala El (2014). The Impact of Social Media on the Political Interests of the Youth in Lebanon at the Wake of the Arab Spring. *Social Science Computer Review* 32 (4): 496–505. 10.1177/0894439313512777, p. 499.

³⁵⁶ cf. Minichbauer, Raimund (2018). *Facebook entkommen: Interviews mit Jaya Klara Brekke, Florencio Cabello, Ramona-Riin Dremljuga, Vladan Joler und Stefania Milan*, 1st edn. Wien: transversal texts, p. 14.

³⁵⁷ cf. *ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁵⁸ cf. Megaphone 1, 2 (2022), Minteshreen 1, 2 (2022), You Stink (2022).

³⁵⁹ Jamali (2015), p. 37.

³⁶⁰ cf. Social media analyst (2022).

social media and mobile communication applications can easily become platforms through which misinformation can spread rapidly, a key counter-revolutionary tactic used to delegitimize the uprising and break its momentum.³⁶¹

The concern about media illiteracy is not new. In 2009 already, Jad Melki examined the study programmes for media and journalism in Lebanese universities and mentioned the lack of media literacy courses.³⁶²

Media literacy comes with critical thinking and fact checking of the information consumed online. The subject is two-sided: First, critical thinking among the citizens should be encouraged, and second, the government should welcome criticism and develop mechanisms to respond to it.³⁶³ Jamali rightly poses the question of “whether social media have managed to improve critical thinking in Arab countries in such a short period,”³⁶⁴ a valid take which remains to be discussed in the future.

Social media platforms employ algorithms with the argument to improve the user experience. Improved user experience means that users “often consume media produced by people they have found of interest.”³⁶⁵ They are mostly exposed to the content they agree with in the first place, thus being kept in echo chambers of their own political opinion. The result of it is a reduced understanding of other points of view and opinions which contradict the hypothesis of an informed public through social media.³⁶⁶

Although social media counts a large number of accounts and interactions, it is just “a small number of citizens [...] politically active on social networking sites, and SNS users do not always reflect the views of a broader population.”³⁶⁷ My interview partners from the political party Minteshreen agreed on this fact and acknowledged the limits of their own activism.³⁶⁸ Another aspect on this subject is the limit of social media activity that is often not directly translated offline. Social media activism can drift towards what

³⁶¹ Merhej, Karim; Qureshi, Elina (2020). The Lebanese Uprising in the Digital Age. *CyberOrient* 14 (2): 85–98. 10.1002/j.1804-3194.2020.tb00004.x, p. 95.

³⁶² cf. Melki, Jad (2009). JOURNALISM AND MEDIA STUDIES IN LEBANON. *Journalism Studies* 10 (5): 672–690. 10.1080/14616700902920174, p. 680.

³⁶³ cf. Jamali (2015), p. 37.

³⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁶⁵ Murthy (2012), p. 1061.

³⁶⁶ cf. Bouvier and Cheng (2019), p. 5.

³⁶⁷ Bosch (2017), p. 224.

³⁶⁸ cf. Minteshreen 1, 2 (2022).

others suggest (Davies, 2013; White, 2010) [to be] mere ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ in which users ‘like’ or forward some content to show their approval for a message, cause, and so on, but do nothing further.³⁶⁹

After the comparison of social media’s potential and limits for online activism, I continue my analysis and turn to examine the category of alternative journalism to resolve if it applies to Megaphone.

7.3 Megaphone and alternative journalism

Alternative journalism is a category to classify journalistic activities that differ from traditional media production. So far, I have argued that Megaphone challenges mainstream media outlets in Lebanon. If this leads to the categorization of Megaphone’s activities as alternative journalism should be discussed in this section.

The term alternative media is broad in its sense and quite general in the way it has been employed in past publications. The first and most obvious defining characters are in juxtaposition to “traditional” or “mainstream” media,³⁷⁰ namely their “content, funding, and implementation of new technology.”³⁷¹ In detail, this entails the ideological differences to their mainstream counterparts at the core of which “concepts of free, noncoercive, inclusive, and meaningful participation by citizens in the political and civic life”³⁷² are rooted. However, according to Kenix’s thorough analysis of mainstream and alternative media, the influence of alternative media is relatively limited in society.³⁷³

Alternative media usually rely on citizen reporting and show connections with social movements active in their context.³⁷⁴ More than that, alternative journalism can include “the media of protest groups, dissidents, and fringe political organizations” whose efforts “can be seen as an attempt to counterbalance the dynamic of mainstream reporting.”³⁷⁵ In other words,

³⁶⁹ Housley et al. (2018), p. 2.

³⁷⁰ See definition in section 3.2.

³⁷¹ Boyle, Michael P; Schmierbach, Mike (2009). Media Use and Protest: The Role of Mainstream and Alternative Media Use in Predicting Traditional and Protest Participation. *Communication Quarterly* 57 (1): 1–17. 10.1080/01463370802662424, p. 7.

³⁷² Maamari and Zein (2014), p. 497.

³⁷³ cf. Kenix (2011), p. 3.

³⁷⁴ cf. *ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Atton and Hamilton (2008), Harcup (2003) cited in Poell, Thomas; Borra, Erik (2012). Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr as platforms of alternative journalism: The social media account of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests. *Journalism* 13 (6): 695–713. 10.1177/1464884911431533, p. 698.

alternative media “have been said to articulate a ‘social order different from and often opposed to the dominant.’”³⁷⁶

The case of Megaphone reveals a lot of similarities to what is alternative journalism and in consequence, alternative media. First, “projects of alternative journalism [...] tend to be organized in non-mainstream ways, often non-hierarchically or collectively, and almost always on a non-commercial basis.”³⁷⁷ The medium started as a collective and evolved over the years from a non-commercial, volunteer-based model towards a professional structure with paid staff members, all with the idea of collectivity and consensus omnipresent in their work. Until today, the structure of the medium follows the principle to eliminate all hierarchies within its staff to a minimum. Although Megaphone operates on a professional level today, it still contrasts traditional media. Their business model excludes revenues from advertisements and focuses on grants by foundations, editorial cooperation with other organisations, and donations.³⁷⁸

Their content focuses on reporting what bigger media outlets tend to oversee, according to their own information, and is brought to their audience on accessible platforms. The publication of articles and analyses by their readers as well as the consideration of their messages on events and emergencies show their open and participatory approach to reporting and the inclusive aspirations of their project.³⁷⁹

The ideology of countering mainstream media outlets is inherent in Megaphone’s DNA. From the mode of production to the content published online: Megaphone counters mainstream media outlets in many ways thus questioning the hegemony of bigger media outlets in Lebanon. Another ideological aspect of alternative journalism becomes evident in the acceptance of ideological bias:

Professionalized journalism is based on the empiricist assumption that there exist facts in the world and that it is possible to identify these facts accurately and without bias. The normative ideal of alternative journalism argues the opposite: that reporting is always bound up with values (personal, professional, institutional) and that it is therefore never possible to separate facts from values.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁶ Hamilton (2000) cited in Kenix (2011), p. 1.

³⁷⁷ Atton, Chris; Hamilton, James Frederick (2008). *Alternative journalism*. Journalism studies. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage, p. 2.

³⁷⁸ cf. Megaphone (2022). *About.*, cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

³⁷⁹ Examples are the following posts: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ9790LoLfp/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaDBmbiL0C0/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXlfpfo8Qd/>, all last accessed June 13, 2022.

³⁸⁰ Atton (2011), p. 18.

My second interview partner from Megaphone acknowledged this detail when she talked about the claim of subjectivity towards Megaphone. She stated that some topics are not up for discussion such as the support for the victims of the port explosion. Yet, the medium does not accept grants that come with an editorial line, thus protecting their independence in news coverage.³⁸¹ It becomes clear that Megaphone offers an ideological alternative to the affiliated media outlets that mirror the sectarian lines in Lebanon.

The discussion about alternative media should, however, include Kenix's concern about entrenched ideologies:

while many alternative (and mainstream) media offer ideologically challenging positions, no media are situated completely outside of the ideological mainstream, carrying distinctive identities completely excluded from entrenched, elite systems of power.³⁸²

This aligns with my observation and discussion before. The founding members of Megaphone have an elite background and met at the elite university, American University of Beirut. Nevertheless, Megaphone ticks the box of many characteristics of alternative media. Especially, the differences in ideology and organisation weigh more than the background of the individuals.

From their ideological standpoint to their activities on social media, the medium opposes mainstream media in more than one way and counters the hegemony of traditional media outlets as I have shown throughout chapter five. They disrupt mainstream medias outlets' monopolies with the discourses they initiate on their social media accounts, also a feature of alternative journalism.³⁸³ Additionally, the medium solely relies on social media and their website to maintain the flow of news and by that depends on new technology, hence another characteristic of alternative media.

Kenix states that "historically, alternative media have been a central force in social change."³⁸⁴ A historical outlook at the past years in Lebanon proves this point:

Alternative news sources and the rise of citizen journalism helped to document the uprising, providing a much-needed non-mainstream view of the uprising as well as documented evidence of human rights abuses by the state security apparatus.³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

³⁸² Kenix (2011), p. 3.

³⁸³ cf. Hamdy (2015), p. 92.

³⁸⁴ Kenix (2011), p. 6.

³⁸⁵ Merhej and Qureshi (2020), p. 95.

The authors of the quote include Megaphone in their analysis of the digital sphere during the uprisings in 2019. Megaphone was and still is an alternative source for many people in Lebanon, in the diaspora, and abroad. At this point, Megaphone's activities show a lot of similarities with the category of alternative journalism. However, the professionalization in recent years might exceed this category when Megaphone continues to establish its social media channels as sources of news and information and aims at becoming mainstream to compete with television and bigger media outlets.³⁸⁶ The growing number of users getting their daily load of news on social media places Megaphone beyond the limitations of the category of alternative journalism. Also, the revolutionizing of news production on social media and its long-term effect within the Lebanese media landscape, which is subject to the next section, support my point.

7.4 Megaphone as pioneers – revolutionizing news production as an act of counter-hegemony

Social media and its tools must be employed in order to create an impact. The next section is going to discuss how Megaphone revolutionized media production on social media in Lebanon.

Social media and its usage work according to their own rules. Digital natives grew up and became technology-savvy from an early age on. My first interview partner understood well how to reach Megaphone's target group by "speaking their language and using a tool that they've mastered and that they are consuming."³⁸⁷ He identifies visual language as well as a set of recurring formats as tools adapted to the use of social media.³⁸⁸ The development of visual language includes the design of templates. These were according to my interview partner quite unique prior to 2019. Nowadays, the templates are much more common and

everybody from thinktanks to political groups to media outlet they sort of use the Megaphone recipe on Instagram. So, the kind of visuals, the cut outs, the layouts [...]. This is something that has been picked up widely. And it's not just that we are fine with it, we are happy with it because also the whole point was to sort of develop the whole media industry. So, if these formats have been made schemized it's part of the success.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

³⁸⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸⁸ cf. *ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *ibid.*

The templates appear to be a key in revolutionizing media production on social media. Megaphone understood how to conquer social media platforms and to transport the output in an innovative way. The success measured in growing numbers of followers as well as the widespread imitation of the “Megaphone recipe” proves them right.



Figure 4: Example of a typical post from Megaphone with one of their templates.³⁹⁰

Another aspect of their revolutionary potential in the Lebanese media industry poses the availability of the content on Creative Commons' license which allows a broad public to reproduce videos and news without obtaining a license first. My first interview partner informs me how TV outlets have picked up on their content and have broadcasted it. Specifically investigative pieces on the port blast have sparked interest among journalists from TV stations who have included these pieces in their work.³⁹¹ It clearly shows the impact of Megaphone's efforts and their echo in the media industry. The medium cannot be overlooked anymore since it established itself on a platform with a growing market share in the future.

Moreover, the templates are more than simple posts. They transport meaning to the followers and to the readers serving as a vehicle for their counter-hegemonic message. Different actors, from media actors to ordinary citizens, can all use their electronic devices to post online to

³⁹⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ9Zl63LNRg/>, last accessed June 13, 2022.

³⁹¹ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

“potentially *concentrate* symbolic power through the exchange of culturally and politically meaningful patterns, or symbols, such as words, images, beliefs, traditions, and practices.”³⁹² Megaphone participates in an online news culture and exchanges information with their readers. They pass on the indirect message of counter-hegemony wrapped in words and images thus concentrating symbolic power. It is what Pierre Bourdieu frames as “the power of the media to construct reality.”³⁹³ In the case of Megaphone, it is a counter-hegemonic one.

Despite the promises and advantages of social media, the flip side cannot be overlooked. My first interview partner showed awareness of the compromises when using social media as the primary platform:

The first compromise is playing the game of corporations that are highly unethical, highly manipulative, use people’s data which are Facebook and Instagram and the others. There is also a limitation related to the crowd that we would reach through social media. That are people that are off social media. And there is also a compromise related to the rules of the game which forces you to be fast, snappy, to say things briefly, to hook people, to charm them to actually read the content.³⁹⁴

The awareness of the hegemony of big tech companies and their practices within techno capitalism is a necessary step to employ their digital tools. The collection of user data is the price for accessible content on these platforms. Atton and Hamilton describe this schism between social media-based (anti-capitalist) activism and the hegemony of digital companies “largely in control of Western economic forces” as “a powerful dialectic.”³⁹⁵ The contradiction between the activist approach and the compromise of using tools in the hands of capitalist companies cannot be overlooked nor denied. It shows that within a capitalist world—online and offline—the practice of counter-hegemony must come as a compromise when an active revolution is absent.

A notion of hegemony on social media is the personalized algorithm that tends to present their users content they like in order to keep them active and engaged on their platforms. Also, “social media users follow and associate with others sharing the same opinions as themselves.”³⁹⁶ Both practices create well-defined and delimited spaces that are called echo

³⁹² Block, Elena (2013). A Culturalist Approach to the Concept of the Mediatization of Politics: The Age of “Media Hegemony”. *Commun Theor* 23 (3): 259–278. 10.1111/comt.12016, p. 259 (emphasis in the original).

³⁹³ Bourdieu, Pierre (ed.) (2009). *Language and symbolic power*, 1st edn. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 166.

³⁹⁴ Megaphone 1 (2022).

³⁹⁵ Atton and Hamilton (2008), p. 4.

³⁹⁶ Murthy 2013 cited in Housley et al. (2018), p. 2.

chambers.³⁹⁷ This is confirmed during both interviews, although my first interview partner differentiates between Instagram and Facebook:

On Instagram it's way more like-minded and homogenous. That's also related to Instagram's algorithm, which really confirms the bias of people and throws the content to people who will like the content.³⁹⁸

In the first phase of Megaphone's activities, they invested in paid promotions to boost their outreach and place their content beyond the echo chambers in order to create a conversation.³⁹⁹ This effort would

target supporters of traditional political parties and the whole point was to actually burst the echo chamber and to have them exposed to our content and hence create a conversation and even some sort of a provocation and this used to succeed because they used to comment and there were very lively debates in the comment section.⁴⁰⁰

The above-mentioned tool to burst the echo chambers apparently worked better on Facebook than on Instagram, therefore, as a result, the Megaphone followership on Facebook is more diverse nowadays.⁴⁰¹ However, my second interview partner put Megaphone's scope into perspective and said, the medium still operated in a small bubble although they try to burst this bubble to go mainstream.⁴⁰²

Besides Megaphone's range online, their efforts translate to the offline world, too. During the October revolution, according to their own information, they went to cover events in Tripoli, Sour, Halba, and Akkar in order "to try to go out of the centrality of Beirut."⁴⁰³ The decentralized coverage all over Lebanon poses a continuous effort. It shows that Megaphone does not exclusively exist in Beirut and online. The medium generates an effect offline, too. The headline *كان عالم* ("He knew"), for example, about President Michel Aoun and his cognizance of the explosive ammonium nitrate in the port of Beirut became a common phrase used when talking about the president. The visual Megaphone posted online was hung in public after the explosion, as my first interview partner remembers.⁴⁰⁴ Also, Megaphone's stories about wounded people after the blast or individuals suffering due to the economic collapse animated followers to reach out to them and offer their support. Therefore,

³⁹⁷ cf. Housley et al. (2018), p. 2.

³⁹⁸ Megaphone 1 (2022).

³⁹⁹ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

⁴⁰⁰ Megaphone 1 (2022).

⁴⁰¹ cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁰² cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

⁴⁰³ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

Megaphone indirectly assisted in offering relief to the people.⁴⁰⁵ My interview partner adds: “There are dozens of examples of that kind when there was action, action meeting the crowd.”⁴⁰⁶ While these acts seem small, it holds the potential of counter-hegemony when people support each other in times of the state’s neglect.

A rather unforeseen effect offline are the debate sessions that arise around videos Megaphone published online. My first interview partner shared the anecdote of people in the Beqaa gathering to discuss the content of the videos.⁴⁰⁷ While this effect corresponds to one of Megaphone’s aims, to create a debate, the unforeseen translation offline is testimony to the potential of the medium to interfere in the Lebanese media landscape.

This section brings forward explicit examples how the digital can translate into real life and can have an offline effect. It shows that the virtual life and reality constantly interact with each other which creates an impact vice-versa. Therefore, it holds the potential to transfer the counter-hegemonic efforts online to offline political spaces, too. The innovative approach to share news on social media and the employment of user- and screen-friendly layouts was novel to news production in Lebanon and gave Megaphone the opportunity to establish their channels on social media, thus revolutionizing the (online) media landscape. This step allows the medium until today to take up space online and thereby enables Megaphone to shape a discursive space as I am going to argue in the following section.

7.5 Social media as a discursive space

Social media is a space whose applications and features have evolved with such speed that the attempt to evaluate the current usage serves rather for documentation than for the purpose of timeliness of the data. The definition of social media that was given in section 3.3 is very broad and almost unspecific in order to cover the varieties of social media and the way it is used. Therefore, in this chapter, I will frame social media as a discursive space in order to embed Megaphone’s counter-hegemonic activity in the Lebanese media landscape.

Siegfried Jäger was a German linguist who became well-known for his contributions which are grounded in the field of critical discourse analysis. He elaborates on the levels of discourse as social locations from which people speak. Meanwhile, he states, the discursive

⁴⁰⁵ cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ cf. *ibid.*

levels interact with each other, refer to each other, use each other, and permeate each other. Thus, for example, discourse fragments of a specialized scientific discourse or of the political discourse can be taken up at the media level and vice versa.⁴⁰⁸ It should be noted that according to Jäger, the individual levels of discourse are intertwined with other levels, in such a way that, for example, even renowned leading media take over information and content of all kinds that have already appeared in other media.⁴⁰⁹ This aspect is confirmed by Megaphone whose content was picked up by mainstream media before.⁴¹⁰ It supports the fact that social media is increasingly interesting for media outlets and news production because a lot of news and information is being shared on social media platforms. Jäger labels the procedure of copying from other media as so-called intermedia dependencies; in other words, people simply copy from each other. This, he says, justifies all the more to speak of one mainstream media discourse, which as a whole, especially as far as the hegemonic media are concerned, can be regarded as uniform in essential aspects, which does not exclude that smaller, and differing discourse positions can come to the fore (to a greater or lesser extent).⁴¹¹ Furthermore, Jäger sees active subjects in their social contexts as (co-)producers and (co-)agents of discourses and the change of reality.⁴¹² Discourses, Jäger argues, are always productions of knowledge. They produce and transport knowledge that is the basis for individual and collective action and the shaping of reality.⁴¹³

Since Megaphone posts on their social media accounts regularly, the medium speaks to and communicates with their wider audience thus shaping the media discourse level that takes place on social media. Megaphone is an active producer and an active agent, shaping the discursive space they created and by that, changing the reality of news circulation on social media. It is my observation that a new level is added through Megaphone's activity which adds another layer to both social media and the Lebanese media landscape and connects these two. Social media has become a discursive space in the broader media landscape, thus shaping the media discourse.

⁴⁰⁸ cf. Jäger, Siegfried (2004). *Kritische Diskursanalyse: Eine Einführung*. Edition DISS, 5th edn. Münster: Unrast-Verl., p. 84. Jäger's category of discourse positions could be a useful point of departure for a wider analysis of social media within the Lebanese media landscape with consideration of other media outlets, too.

⁴⁰⁹ cf. *ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ cf. Megaphone 1 (2022).

⁴¹¹ cf. Jäger (2004), p. 84.

⁴¹² cf. Jäger, Siegfried (2006). Diskurs und Wissen: Theoretische und methodische Aspekte einer Kritischen Diskurs- und Dispositivanalyse. In: Reiner Keller, Andreas Hirsland, Werner Schneider, Willy Viehöver (eds.) *Handbuch Sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse*. Bd.1: Theorien und Methoden, 2nd edn., pp. 83–114. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, p. 87.

⁴¹³ cf. *ibid.*, p. 89.

My second interviewee locates Megaphone as a complement within the Lebanese media landscape, but at the same time as a medium that strongly counters the mainstream media outlets.⁴¹⁴ Therefore, I analyse, Megaphone takes up the discursive space on social media to actively counter mainstream media. The space they shape is one of counter-hegemony which turns social media into a contested media space. Exemplary for this is the reporting on the October revolution. My first interviewee from the political party Minteshreen states that social media was “used a lot to share the news that wasn’t been shared, online” while the mainstream media outlets “were sharing the stories they wanted to share, creating the narrative they wanted to create, and ignoring other things that maybe, that maybe they were trying to hide.”⁴¹⁵ My second interviewee from Minteshreen adds:

Especially during the beginning of the revolution with this new movement as a whole, the exposure that we got on traditional media was very limited. And so, we were extremely reliant on social media itself.⁴¹⁶

In the case of Lebanon, social media became a space to counter the mainstream narratives of hegemonic media outlets. Radi observed similar features of social media during the revolution in Morocco in 2011. He states: “There is no denying that communications technologies challenged the power of regimes to rein in protests within a local framework.”⁴¹⁷ Bruns et al. observe the role of social media during the uprisings in different countries in 2011 and come to the conclusion that social media platforms and their usage “were *additional* communication tools for activists, rather than drivers of the demonstrations themselves.”⁴¹⁸ With regard to the Lebanese uprisings, Karim Merhej and Elina Qureshi realistically observe that the uprisings would have occurred without digital tools. However, and that is remarkable, they state that “there is no doubt that these tools and social media platforms have played an instrumental role in the Lebanese uprising.”⁴¹⁹

However, “TV remains the main source of news for 94% of Lebanese despite a 4% decrease when compared with results in 2017.”⁴²⁰ Yet, at the same time, social media becomes an important source of information, especially for the younger generation:

⁴¹⁴ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

⁴¹⁵ Minteshreen 1 (2022).

⁴¹⁶ Minteshreen 2 (2022).

⁴¹⁷ Radi (2017), p. 45.

⁴¹⁸ Bruns, Highfield and Burgess (2013), p. 873 (emphasis in the original).

⁴¹⁹ Merhej and Qureshi (2020), p. 94.

⁴²⁰ Dennis et al. (2017, 2019) cited in El-Richani (2021), p. 167.

there has been a decrease in use of legacy news media (e.g., newspapers, television and radio) on their traditional platforms. At the same time, social network sites (SNSs) are becoming central to the way people experience news. Indeed, SNSs overall, and particularly conversational networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, are an increasingly significant source for news.⁴²¹

Other authors such as Innocent Chilwa and Gwen Bouvier confirm this trend of changing user behaviour and consumption practices towards social media as a primary source for news.⁴²² Lebanon is no exception since the internet became increasingly accessible and the use of electronic tools very frequent. Meanwhile, El-Richani states, “there has been a significant rise in the percentage of Lebanese who get their news on their smartphone (92% in 2019 as opposed to 76% in 2017)”⁴²³ while only 10% of Lebanese get their news from printed newspapers.⁴²⁴ Furthermore, despite the bias within the Lebanese media landscape and its ties to the political society, El-Richani stresses the diversity of platforms for local news and commentary in Lebanon.⁴²⁵ It is due to actors such as Megaphone who reinforce the development of news consumption on social media and add diversity to the Lebanese media landscape.

Although social media became a “facilitator”⁴²⁶ during the protests and uprisings of recent years in Lebanon, it is, as previously discussed, a limited space. My interviewees were aware of the limitations of social media which are the limitations of the discursive space as a whole:

If we are talking, if we are really talking elections and mass media and mass promotion, we are not gonna reach everybody on Instagram or Twitter. We gonna reach them through TV, we can reach them in person on the ground or when they are coming to campaigning.⁴²⁷

It shows that the interviewee identifies other discursive spaces (e.g., public spaces) to render political activism as a political party successful. Also, traditional media and among them especially TV stations are seen as an important discursive space to enter in order to communicate a message to a broader audience:

⁴²¹ Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage (2018), p. 583.

⁴²² cf. Chilwa and Bouvier (2019), p. vii.

⁴²³ Dennis et al. (2017, 2019) cited in El-Richani (2021), p. 167.

⁴²⁴ cf. *ibid.*

⁴²⁵ cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 174.

⁴²⁶ Minteshreen 2 (2022).

⁴²⁷ Minteshreen 1 (2022).

The main struggle is actually the fact that a majority of the people that you need to target to actually make change and to this revolution that we are talking about is access to traditional media.⁴²⁸

Two of my interviewees who are political activists, described social media in an interesting way, namely as a “tool,”⁴²⁹ which “helps you push something forward.”⁴³⁰ While the claims of the protests since 2010 remain similar, every new generation of protesters exploits the resources available to them.⁴³¹ Social media comes in as a resource available to the Lebanese to be used as a tool in order to take up discursive space online.

I conclude that social media constitutes a novel possibility for news consumption. The news production, as became clear in my analysis, does not solely rely on traditional media anymore but it is shaped by actors posing a real alternative within the Lebanese media landscape. Additionally, within this discursive space the potential for counter hegemony is rooted and can be turned into counter-hegemonic actions in the form of news production that counters the narratives of mainstream media outlets in Lebanon.

7.5 Perspective: Megaphone and the future

Megaphone has been publishing news and information for five years. Since then, the Lebanese press and media outlets have experienced an existential crisis that is still ongoing.⁴³² What adds to the economic crisis that also affects the media industry, is the fact that social media plays an increasingly significant role in the realm of news production. My first interviewee from Megaphone comments:

the future of the industry as a whole, of journalism as a whole is going into our direction, not theirs. I think they are kind of trying to get prepared for that and mitigate and start doing that shift but it’s very slow.⁴³³

It indicates that Megaphone has gained an advantage over traditional media outlets by establishing a news channel on social media. After my research trip to Beirut, the medium launched a new website in spring 2022 which plays a supporting role in countering media’s hegemony in Lebanon by providing longer articles and users’ analyses. The launch of the new website is a result of the stabilization of the medium in the Lebanese media landscape and the

⁴²⁸ Minteshreen 2 (2022).

⁴²⁹ Minteshreen 1, 2 (2022), You Stink (2022).

⁴³⁰ Minteshreen 2 (2022).

⁴³¹ cf. Radi (2017), p. 33.

⁴³² cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 174.

⁴³³ Megaphone 1 (2022).

ongoing evolution of their output and channels. In addition to that, Megaphone's business model which relies on funding from foundations, collaborations, and, to a small part, on donations, appears to be more robust and resilient in light of the ongoing economic and fiscal crisis in Lebanon. The shutdown of various print newspapers and the dismissal of TV stations' staff are signs of this transformation.⁴³⁴ Due to these conditions, I see Megaphone's potential to grow and to stabilize their activities in the future.

The medium's aim is to continue their work with the objective to document current developments as well as to comment on political, economic, and social topics. Also, the coverage of election processes remains a pillar of their work. Another aim of Megaphone is "about tapping into the political imagination and providing a platform for people who have new ideas about how it can be organized and popularized, and [...] the political project that's driving us."⁴³⁵ With these objectives in mind, Megaphone tries to increase their outreach in the future and to include "a wider array of topics but keeping the same values of amplifying the voices of the unheard, covering subjects that are not told otherwise in mainstream media," all the while to provide a "better understanding of politics and current affairs and economy and judiciary system, [...] in order to be able to hold people accountable."⁴³⁶

However, the ongoing crises in Lebanon have had an impact on Megaphone's outlook, too. My first interview partner describes the shift in consumers' behaviour that followed the series of events from 2019 on:

a lot of people showed more interest in politics. So, kind of our mandate was a bit different because people were already interested but now, we just needed to give them more transparency and clarity of what is happening, and coverage because the TV cameras weren't on the ground all the time while we were there. And so, the world where our audience stands changed, and how they thought changed, their behaviour changed, they are constantly for example on social media, checking news. But then, after it was Corona, it slowed down and then with the *infiġār*, the explosion and everything a lot of people left the country or not interested anymore, lost hope so, there is also again this shift in behaviour. So, we need to accommodate for and optimize our content for it and optimize the format and the content itself to cover this basically.⁴³⁷

It seems that Megaphone always adapted to the change in circumstances showing creativity, resilience, and adaptability to accommodate for progress and evolution. The structure of Megaphone allows for flexible reactions towards changing circumstances thus bearing

⁴³⁴ cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 174.

⁴³⁵ Megaphone 1 (2022).

⁴³⁶ Megaphone 2 (2022).

⁴³⁷ *ibid.*

another advantage over bigger media outlets with more rigid modes of operation due to a bigger team.

However, growth as one of the medium's main objectives remains difficult to achieve as my first interview partner explains which is not a matter of money:

A lot of the work is dependent on a few people on the talent that has been developed in-house. You are in a setting where most of the talent have left the country, so you are not left with many people in Beirut. We are also in the context where schools of journalism and media schools don't really train people for digital media, [...] digital journalist; to produce content for social media; to be actual content creator with a journalistic edge. This is a skill that is not widely present in Lebanon. This makes the scalability question really serious. Even if we were to grow and we had the funds to grow faster it would still be an issue to grow with the same kind of content without having enough people who can produce that kind of content.⁴³⁸

For the future, the first interviewee hopes to maintain the ethos of collectivity and creativity while growing Megaphone as a medium that publishes news on social media, and to reinvent the work of the medium constantly to permanently evolve as part of the Lebanese media landscape.⁴³⁹

8 Conclusion

This thesis aimed at analysing the interference of the social media-based medium Megaphone in the Lebanese media landscape. I proved that Megaphone contests the hegemony of media outlets which show various connections to the political parties in Lebanon. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony served as a useful framework to assess how Megaphone counters bigger media outlets' hegemony within the media landscape.

Counter-hegemony has been rooted in Megaphone's ideological basis from the beginning. The medium and the people who comprise it oppose to reproduce the narratives of the mainstream media outlets and instead aim at complementing the media industry by offering an alternative based on a left-leaning perspective on politics and society. Since the beginning, the provision of information as well as a platform for the Lebanese youth to exchange and discuss political ideas both have been central drivers.

⁴³⁸ Megaphone 1 (2022).

⁴³⁹ cf. *ibid.*

The political society in Lebanon is affiliated with the media outlets and employs them for consent formation which is a necessary ingredient to achieve hegemony. In contrast, Megaphone shows no affiliation to the political society to date, and continuously informs their audience on social media. The act of sharing information and informing their audience counters the consent formation and educates the followers. The disruption of what Gramsci calls the common sense in a hegemonic society comes hereby as an act of counter-hegemony as well. By offering an alternative to the mainstream common sense, the possibility of an alternative common sense emerges and further reinforces the momentum of counter-hegemony.

Gramsci widened the definition of intellectual activity in order to comprehend all activity by humans that demand a minimum of intellectual capacity, as organic intellectual. The introduction of this term helps to frame the people behind Megaphone as intellectuals in opposition to the intellectuals who stabilize the hegemony of the ruling class.

The subaltern is a concept first mentioned in Gramsci's writings and further developed in the decades after his death. It comprises the multiple groups that are being ruled by a ruling class, either through hegemony or another form of dominance. Megaphone uses its social media channels to dismantle inequalities in Lebanese society and to give a platform to marginalized people. The act of giving space to the stories of the subaltern calls out the responsibility of the political society thus questioning the mode of governance and, thereby, their hegemony.

The rather elitist background of the people behind Megaphone has been a subject of discussion in this thesis. The example of Megaphone illustrates that Lebanon is a special case that exceeds Gramsci's binary distinction of working class – bourgeoisie. Without denying that these exist in Lebanon, I made the case that the introduction of sectarian vertical lines structuring the Lebanese society adds another dimension to the theoretical framework.⁴⁴⁰ Based on this observation, I argued that revolutionary potential is existent in other parts of society in addition to the working class. The expansion of the understanding of who holds revolutionary potential enabled the framing of Megaphone as a medium with political influence. Yet, the intersection between the influence of alternative mediums such as Megaphone and the offline effect and the potential for political change should be subject to a longer-term study.

⁴⁴⁰ Further analysis centring on the question of these vertical sectarian lines and the potential it bears for counter-hegemonic actions could be conducted in the future.

Megaphone was founded in 2017 and gained in popularity during the uprisings of the October revolution in 2019. As a result, the medium professionalized and adapted its previously volunteer-based structure into a full-time model. In addition, it acted in favour of the general message of the uprisings. During the protests, Megaphone considered it very important to cover the events directly from the streets, thus countering the mainstream media reporting that in some cases deliberately failed to report on the protests. In the months after the protests, the status-quo recurred once again and in addition, the country plunged into a political, financial, and economic crisis. Since then, the political society attempted to stabilize its hegemony by various means of what I identify as acts of passive revolution—in opposition to an active revolution—that aim at maintaining the power over the ruled. The identification of acts of passive revolution are inherently counter-hegemonic as well as the coverage of such acts. Here, two layers of counter-hegemony intersect. First, the act of publishing, and second, the effect of informing the Lebanese people about this process which corresponds to the formation of the common sense.

Megaphone established itself on social media and has a growing number of followers on its different channels. The medium guarantees a constant output of information and news that are adapted to the peculiarities of the different platforms. It is yet another example of how citizens' social media activities have found a new form of expression, one that is inherently counter-hegemonic and takes advantage of the positive aspects of social media usage by creating an open, accessible, and communicative space. Social media was in its earlier days mostly understood to be a space for individual communication and networking. The project turned into an institutionalized media outlet by using social media in an alternative and innovative way. Megaphone participates in this online sphere where multifaceted contexts and purposes merge, “interact and overlap in often unexpected ways that are not captured by one-size-fits-all explanations premised on static views of technological affordances.”⁴⁴¹ To embrace the fact of the multiplicity of realities existing on social media is a first step to grasp it for what it is: a space still depending on social interactions. The internet remains to be a social medium.⁴⁴²

Social media's potential for open communication, accessibility, and organization has been widely recognized, as well as the limits such as media illiteracy, algorithms, and the creation of echo chambers. Between the two poles of positive and critical voices on “the exact role of

⁴⁴¹ Valeriani and Vaccari (2016), p. 1871.

⁴⁴² cf. Minichbauer (2018), p. 11.

the Internet, social media and mobile phones for activism and political change,”⁴⁴³ the digital space and its impact on society and activism remains contested.

Despite the limitations of social media, Megaphone turns the digital world into a discursive space and adds another layer to the Lebanese media landscape. Since Megaphone is widely established among the younger generation and the diaspora, and active within a space with prospects for growth in the future, it holds the promise to maintain the advantageous position, and stabilize its structure to continue countering the hegemony of Lebanese media outlets and the affiliated political society.

Social media serves political activists, for instance, from the party Minteshreen, rather as a tool to communicate their message, and to position themselves in the political landscape. For a medium such as Megaphone, social media becomes the main space to counter hegemony. Not only that, the question about the future of the media industry is a valid one, taking into account the existential crisis the Lebanese media industry is currently facing due to shortages in funding from the political society and the economic crisis cutting their revenues from advertising.⁴⁴⁴ However, traditional media—among them newspapers, radio stations, and most importantly TV channels—remain the most influential media outlets in Lebanon and in other parts of the world. The intangible relation between social media and traditional media creates tensions and continues to shape the diverse media landscapes in the future. I suggest that this thesis could serve as a point of departure to explore social media’s potential to mitigate the transformations in the industry and the various effects it has on news consumption, the social experience, and the impact in society.

One aspect of Megaphone’s counter-hegemonic activities did not find entrance into the discussion yet: pressure on Megaphone or acts to counter their counter-hegemony. My second interview partner commented that the medium did get a few threats of lawsuits from private persons that were subject to their posts, but the threats never materialized. When Megaphone’s videographers or photographers covered the protests in the streets during October 2019 or in the months after, their staff members were targets of police violence along with other protesters. However, this form of repression did not target them as identified members of Megaphone but as bystanders and hereby as supporters of the protesters.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Bouvier and Cheng (2019), p. 8.

⁴⁴⁴ cf. El-Richani (2021), p. 174.

⁴⁴⁵ cf. Megaphone 2 (2022).

Some nuances of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony have been postponed to future discussions, namely the war of manoeuvre versus the war of position, and the formation of a historic bloc. Although the coalition of forces forming a historic bloc to counter hegemony has not been considered in this thesis, it poses, nonetheless, an interesting aspect in Gramsci's thoughts and Megaphone's work. Future research could be conducted while considering the effectiveness of a historic bloc as

a coalition of forces, that does not duplicate power disparities inherent in the existing world-system, that avoids localism or nationalism, and promotes global solidarity through networking that links the local and the global (Amoore et al., 2000; Gills, 2000) – a unifying, non-homogenizing, and indigenizing strategy of resistance.⁴⁴⁶

On another note, one finds striking parallels between Gramsci's biography and Megaphone's activism. First, Gramsci worked as a journalist himself and even set up a weekly newspaper with a socialist orientation "which became the voice of Bolshevik politics in Italy,"⁴⁴⁷ or in other words, the *megaphone*. Furthermore, the group around this weekly newspaper "played a crucial role in assisting the workers' councils that emerged spontaneously during the general strike and factory occupations in Turin in 1919 and 1920."⁴⁴⁸ Exactly 100 years later in October 2019, it was Megaphone that assisted the protesters in different Lebanese cities to cover the demonstrations and publicize their demands as well as their struggles in the streets. Reincarnation or political continuity—the counter-hegemonic spirit lives on, regardless of time, space, or context and will do so in the future.

⁴⁴⁶ Katz (2006), p. 336.

⁴⁴⁷ de Smet (2016), p. 4.

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid.*

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Appendix

Interviews

Megaphone 1 (2022). Interview with the managing director of Megaphone. Beirut, February 14, 2022.

Megaphone 2 (2022). Interview with the creative director of Megaphone. Beirut, February 16, 2022.

Minteshreen 1 (2022). Interview with one of the co-founders of the political party Minteshreen. Beirut, February 10, 2022.

Minteshreen 2 (2022). Interview with a member of the social media committee of Minteshreen. Beirut, February 21, 2022.

Social Media Analyst (2022). Interview with a social media analyst from Lebanon. Beirut, February 11, 2022.

You Stink (2022). Interview with one of the founders of the You Stink movement in 2015. Beirut, February 17, 2022.

Interview questions

Megaphone

Please tell me a bit about you and your role within Megaphone.

How do you maintain the collective's structure?

What are the different roles within the collective?

What are the daily tasks?

How do you choose the content?

What are the advantages of being an independent collective?

Please describe the potential you see in the activities of Megaphone.

What are the challenges you face daily?

Why did you choose social media as your main platform?

Please tell me more about Megaphone's social media strategy.

How did it develop over the course of the years?

How would you describe your base of followers?

How do you interact with your followers?

Do you see an impact offline?

Where do you see Megaphone in the Lebanese media landscape?

How do you see your relation to bigger media outlets?

What is Megaphone's aim for the future?

What would you like to stress at the end of the interview?

Additional questions for other interview partners

Please tell me more about your social media strategy.

What kind of information do you put online?

How do you employ social media to enhance your activities?

Abstract

Social Media played a vital role for the protests and outcomes of the different revolutions that took place in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) throughout 2011. Networking and mobilization via Facebook or Twitter were vital features to organize demonstrations and interventions as well as sharing the news from the ground to a broader international audience. However, the use of social media has evolved within the past ten years and has shaped the media landscapes in a profound way. Next to the features of social media such as the immediate responsiveness and information sharing from the ground, the establishment of news channels sustaining a regular output of information can be witnessed, thus complementing the media landscapes. The outputs of such channels inform their followers and provide a tool to challenge mainstream media narratives. The Lebanese medium Megaphone is exemplary for this development by posting regularly on their social media accounts since 2017.

This master's thesis explores the counter-hegemonic actions of Megaphone taking Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and its various facets as a starting point. Theoretical aspects such as the subaltern, organic intellectuals, and passive revolution are taken into consideration for the analysis of Megaphone and its role in the Lebanese media landscape. Since its beginnings, counter-hegemony has been inherently rooted in the medium's approach and poses one of the main drivers for the group's activities on social media. This is reflected in the medium's editorial choices as well as their model of operation.

The analysis shows that the usage of social media as the main platform for news dissemination bears potential to counter hegemony, albeit its limitations and the persisting dominance of mainstream media. Megaphone's choice to be social media based is a conscious one and gives the medium an advantage over its mainstream media counterparts in light of the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon that affects the media industry as well as the transforming news consumption that shows a clear shift towards social media. It allows the medium to take up discursive spaces in a contested media landscape that would otherwise be very difficult to conquer.

Zusammenfassung

Soziale Medien spielten eine entscheidende Rolle für die Proteste der verschiedenen Revolutionen, die 2011 in Westasien und Nordafrika (WANA) stattfanden. Die Vernetzung und Mobilisierung über Facebook oder Twitter war von großer Bedeutung für die Organisation von Demonstrationen und Interventionen. Auch gelang es ein breiteres internationales Publikum über die Geschehnisse zu informieren. Die Nutzung sozialer Medien hat sich jedoch in den letzten zehn Jahren weiterentwickelt und die Medienlandschaft tiefgreifend verändert. Neben individueller Nutzung, die von schneller Reaktionsfähigkeit und Vernetzung profitiert, etablierten sich Nachrichtenkanäle, die regelmäßig News veröffentlichen und so die jeweilige Medienlandschaft ergänzen. Solche Kanäle haben das Potenzial, die Narrative der Mainstreammedien in Frage zu stellen. Das libanesische Medium Megaphone, das seit 2017 regelmäßig auf seinen Social-Media-Kanälen Nachrichten postet, ist ein Beispiel für diese Entwicklung.

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die gegenhegemonialen Aktivitäten von Megaphone, wobei die Theorie der kulturellen Hegemonie des italienischen Marxisten Antonio Gramsci und ihre verschiedenen Facetten als Ausgangspunkt dienen. Theoretische Aspekte wie die Subalternen, die organischen Intellektuellen und die passive Revolution werden für die Analyse von Megaphone und seiner Rolle in der libanesischen Medienlandschaft herangezogen. Der Hegemonie großer Medienhäuser in der libanesischen Medienlandschaft zu begegnen ist seit Gründung im Medium verankert. Dies spiegelt sich sowohl in den redaktionellen Entscheidungen des Mediums als auch in seiner Struktur und dem Finanzmodell wider.

Die Nutzung sozialer Medien als bisher einzige Plattform für die Verbreitung von Nachrichten birgt ein großes Potenzial, um der Hegemonie entgegenzuwirken, auch wenn die Nutzung Nachteile mit sich bringt und Mainstreammedien weiterhin Marktführer sind. Megaphone hat sich bewusst für soziale Medien als Plattform entschieden und verschafft sich damit einen Vorteil gegenüber den Mainstream-Medien angesichts der anhaltenden Wirtschaftskrise im Libanon, die ihre Spuren in der Medienbranche hinterlässt. Auch der sich wandelnde Nachrichtenkonsum zeigt eine deutliche Verschiebung hin zu sozialen Medien. Dadurch kann Megaphone diskursive Räume einnehmen, die angesichts der hohen Kosten für ein Medienunternehmen ansonsten nur schwer einzunehmen wären.