



On digital media in Lebanon’s political crisis

Part 3 of 4 in the series: Digital technology and international politics

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KEY FINDINGS

- The digital shift is at the origin of two contrasting developments: the ‘Little Brother’ and ‘Big Brother’ effects.
- The ‘Little Brother’ effect of social media is to facilitate the rise of new actors and to undermine established authorities.
- The ‘Big Brother’ effect of digitalization is to enable surveillance and repression.
- In weak and divided states, the ‘Little Brother effect’ may be more powerful.
- Lebanon is a failed state with media abundance.
- Digital media played a key role in the 2019 uprising.
- Norway can promote freedom of expression and independent media in Lebanon by supporting fact-based digital platforms and the new alternative journalist union.
- However, digitalization should be handled with care in a fragile state context.

The technology-driven transformation of the media environment is changing politics worldwide. Yet everywhere is not the same. The digital revolution yields different results in different political contexts. This policy brief analyses digital media’s role in the political crisis unfolding in Lebanon – a weak, divided and contested state. It discusses the implications for Norwegian development aid to the country.

The ‘Little Brother’ and ‘Big Brother’ effects of social media

Communication on the internet increases the speed, scale and scope of information exchanges. It changes the game of political communication and turns up the political heat. From the Arab Spring to Donald Trump and the Black Lives Matter movement, the power of social media has been demonstrated in autocracies and democracies alike. Nevertheless, the political

consequences of the digital communications revolution vary greatly between countries. Some states are more resilient to its negative sides than others.

To understand how social media affects politics, the first step is recognizing that it works in conflicting ways. The digital shift is at the origin of two concurrent but contrasting developments. For illustrative purposes, I shall refer to them as the ‘Little Brother’ and ‘Big Brother’ effects. The sibling metaphor refers to how social media relates to and impacts on authority structures. As the conventional image has it, the little brother is rebellious and subversive whereas the big brother reinforces existing power relations.

The ‘Little Brother effect’ of social media is to facilitate the rise of new actors and to undermine established authorities. There are many indications that digital transformation leads to such changes and disruption. Starting with the media sphere, the influence and affordability of digital platforms pose challenges to mainstream media and journalism. New players enter the fray, audiences become more polarized, and media professionals accustomed to steering the debate find it harder to sway public opinion. In politics, digital media populism undercuts the traditional governing majorities, leaving the political landscape more fragmented and volatile. For authoritarian rulers, the digital turn is a huge source of concern because it provides regime opponents with multiple opportunities to connect and to organize protests. Social media is deeply intertwined with contemporary social movements.

The ‘Big Brother effect’ of digitalization is to enable surveillance and repression, which has the opposite implications for the power of the state. Governments take advantage of communication on the internet to crack down on political opposition. Social media platforms offer free communication in exchange for extracting user information. They harvest unprecedented amounts of data that is sold to advertisers and can be used by states to monitor citizens. The development and spread of digital surveillance tools in authoritarian states is happening quickly. Technical innovations enable intelligence agencies to track citizens and repress dissent before it erupts. Such preventive repression threatens to eliminate the online arena as a free space for coordinating collective action.

In sum, the effect of social media on the state’s ability to control dissent is ambiguous. Digital communication provides opposition movements with new opportunities to mobilize supporters, but

also expands the toolbox of the repressive apparatus of the state. Which side gains or loses more depends on the context. An important question is whether the state possesses the organizing capacity and internal cohesion it takes to counter social media-led disruption. States such as China and Russia combine technological progress and centralized bureaucracies in ways that make their digital authoritarianism strong. On the other hand, in weak and divided states, the ‘Little Brother effect’ may be more powerful because there is no Leviathan who can control the information flow. Social media may thus deepen the very political volatility and societal polarization that characterised these states in the first place.

Lebanon’s 2019 uprising

On 17 October 2019, people took to the streets of Beirut and other cities in Lebanon to protest the government’s plans to impose taxes on IP telephony, gasoline and tobacco. The proposed new taxes included fees for the use of WhatsApp, a free messaging app that is very popular due to the high cost and outdated infrastructure of regular mobile services in the country. Before the mainstream media had decided whether and how to cover the protests, digital platforms were flooded with videos, pictures, tweets and threads of people taking part in them. Desperate Lebanese said they had no choice but to revolt against the growing economic and political injustices in Lebanon, and their testimony convinced many fellow citizens to do the same.

WhatsApp not only triggered the demonstrations but also became the primary means through which the protesters campaigned and organised their movement. Information about marches, road blockades, and political and economic developments spread widely and quickly on WhatsApp groups. As the most widely used application in Lebanon, Facebook also played a large role in the uprising. Activists created special accounts and pages to disseminate content related to what they called ‘the revolution’, and ordinary people shared footage of their participation in the protests. Facebook’s Live Broadcast feature facilitated such outreach and made it difficult for the authorities to deny or distort the reporting of events.

Propelled by social media, coverage of the protests spread to mainstream media and journalism as well. TV continues to exercise a huge influence in Lebanon and several of the most-viewed channels sided with the protesters. Their support was not a foregone conclusion. Media owners and many journalists have tight connections with the political class whose corruption and mismanagement the protesters

were targeting. Lebanese media and journalism have a history of instrumentalization by the elites. Although by regional standards, Lebanese freedom of expression has been fair, the lack of a strong public broadcaster and media ownership structure have made media organizations and individual journalists subservient to politicians. However, with social media ablaze with the 2019 revolt, it appeared untenable for many journalists and media owners to maintain a servile posture. Thus, the main commercial TV stations – MTV, LBCI and New TV – provided passionate and positive coverage of the uprising. By contrast, the channels – OTV, NBN and al-Manar – that were loyal to the alliance between President Michel Aoun, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and Hizbullah portrayed the uprising as a conspiracy against the nation.

Trend-setting journalists took an activist and defiant stance in the protests. They went to great lengths to show the conditions of the people in the street, impoverished neighbourhoods, and peripheral areas that the media had failed to cover in the past. They declared that it was time to break with an outdated understanding of the journalist's role as 'holding microphones for the politicians' and took steps to create an independent journalist union. Social media was an important contributing factor to this shift. It enabled close and direct contact between journalists and members of the protest movement and opened a space where journalists could intervene personally in public debate, irrespective of their media organization's editorial line. The leading Lebanese journalists have hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter, and their testimonies and opinions carried weight.

Failed state with media abundance

The uprising shook the elite to its core but failed in its ambition to remake the political order. It left Lebanon in a volatile condition marked by a series of spiralling economic and political crises. First, the economy foundered under the impact of the financial system's breakdown and the COVID-19 pandemic. Hard-pressed ordinary citizens saw their savings locked in banks and losing value while the super-rich sent their money abroad. Then, in August 2020, a warehouse holding ammonium nitrate exploded in the port of Beirut, causing large-scale death and destruction and popular fury over the incompetence of decision-makers.

Lebanon is a profoundly failing state. Yet it is also a media-saturated environment where developments of all sorts are subject to around-the-clock media coverage. For every news item, dozens of media outlets stand ready to track all the details. Stories are

reported and shared, in minute detail, in practically no time. The post-2019 collapse sparked an acute attention to news among ordinary Lebanese. People experienced how political developments could affect their lives in concrete and far-reaching ways. The news in Lebanon is not a distant thing that you only watch on TV. It plays into the price and availability of basic goods and may interrupt the supply of petrol and electricity.

In a failed state context, digitalization carries risks. Research finds that social media does not generate conflicts in and of itself, but tends to amplify grievances in countries that are already divided. It exposes people to viewpoints and hostilities they would not otherwise encounter in their everyday lives. It creates the impression that the 'other' is more different and extreme than may really be the case, because social media algorithms favour polarizing content. In a country such as Lebanon where everyone – from individuals with websites to political parties, intelligence agencies and foreign countries – seeks to influence the framing of events, the prevalence of fake news is also high.

Lebanon finds itself in a precarious state, with living conditions worsening and its people on the brink. A scandal of whatever sort could spark unrest at any time, and social media is the most likely source of such a spark. To prepare for this eventuality, and to turn reporting and commentary on current affairs to their advantage, Lebanese political parties have expanded their presence in the digital sphere. Critical journalists say that when they turn the spotlight on mismanagement and corruption in the political class, they are routinely targeted by regime-affiliated 'electronic armies'. Hizbullah, in particular, has upgraded its social media strategy. Capitalizing on its membership base and organizational resources, it has emerged as the number one player on Twitter and a very active force on Facebook.

The politicians' careful attention to and investment in digital communication stand in contrast to their neglect of the economy and foot-dragging on political reform. Being unwilling or unable to address the root causes of the crises and thereby regain the people's trust, they concentrate on impression management. Social media is a tool for spinning compromising episodes. However, no actor is in a position to monopolize its power potential in a weak and divided country.

Policy recommendations

Norway wants to integrate digitalization in its development policy as a means to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The findings

presented in this policy brief imply that, with regard to digital media in a fragile state context, such integration should be handled with care. The ‘Little Brother’ effect of social media undermines the power of the state, but offers no guarantee of creating workable authority structures in its place. Digitalization may instead fuel grievances and create the impression that societal divisions are insurmountable. Political leaders may wilfully play upon such tensions and perceptions with the aim of rallying certain identity groups. In the most extreme case, such media-based polarization could lead to violent conflict.

To strengthen society’s resilience to the negative influence of social media, traditional socio-economic development remains the key. Norway should continue to invest in areas such as education, civil society and gender equality in Lebanon that help sustain people’s empowerment and awareness. Conventional development aid is as relevant as ever in the digital age.

With specific regard to media development, Norway should channel aid to news organizations that are free from political interference and can provide balanced information in a polarized public space. It is important to support fact-based and independent media and journalism in a situation where misinformation and biases in the transmission of news are rife. The digital shift has resulted in some promising developments for Lebanese media and new opportunities for external actors to promote freedom of expression. In contrast to mainstream media, which is instrumentalized by the rulers, the

digital shift has opened a space where actors who defy the elite-controlled communication system can exist. The platforms Megaphone and Daraj are prominent examples of this. By going digital, these sites can operate at a much lower cost and reach wide audiences regardless. Social media, moreover, offer alternative news providers a tool to communicate with the public and demonstrate the popularity of their posts. This connection with and ability to rally support in society is vital. It gives journalists working for political accountability some leverage vis-à-vis actors who are otherwise more powerful than them and who have a track record of mismanagement and corruption.

Finally, Norway should support the alternative professional union, which independent-minded journalists were also able to create thanks to the digital transformation. The alternative union was established in a reaction to the authorities’ co-optation of the old press union, preventing the old organization from defending the interests of journalists in any meaningful way. The alternative union seeks to be a check on the government and to strengthen the capacity for critical journalism in Lebanon. Norway should publicly recognize the importance of its work, connect with relevant international partners and help finance the organization’s grants for investigative journalism and professional development.

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