

PLAYING THE REGIONAL CARD

Advertising revenue is down, competition from Gulf-based outlets is increasing and the influence of politics is clamping down on press freedom

By Thomas Schellen

The Lebanese journalistic media and the advertising industry are sharing a single berth in a slow boat to an uncertain future. It has been a rough ride, and even taking into consideration the most optimistic estimates, it is not expected to turn into a pleasure cruise for at least another 18 months, according to industry estimates.

With a few positive exceptions – this magazine having the pleasant experience of being one of them – the country's print and even audio-visual media outlets have seen advertising revenue dwindle and hover at unsustainable levels. For at least three years now, adspend on the national level has been depressed, and by best estimates, has not exceed \$70 million. The largest share went to television advertising and then to print, outdoor media and finally radio. It is no secret that this revenue should only be able to feed one or perhaps two TV stations, less than a handful of dailies and a smallish bouquet of other print media. Yet, a



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tional licenses) at the syndicate, which total 1,400 and 110, respectively. But it is still a considerable amount when measured against the size of the Lebanese market. And it is decidedly humongous when viewed against the print media's share of 25% to 30% of the adspend pie, knowing that advertising revenue is the economic lifeblood of not only broadcasters and magazines but also daily print publications, implying that the majority of

about 35,000, a figure about a third below the 50,000 free, three-month trial subscriptions it placed on the market in its launch phase but definitely impressive by Beirut standards.

A dose of reality

One may want to remember in this context, though, that the ad industry's professional media buyers here have long grown wary of print-run claims by any media. Liberal inflation of circulation figures is one of the industry's more notorious habits, even if they are held in check by independent audit firms and liability issues. Professional audit firms in the sector – whose business it is to monitor media – are fighting for a change of these practices in the Middle East, most recently at a publishing conference held last month in Dubai. They never tire to tell publishers that fake circulation muscles only lead to the deflation of rate card values and harm their business in the long run as badly as steroids harm an athlete. For the journalism side of many Lebanese publications, the economic

THE NUMBERS JUST DON'T SEEM TO BE ADDING UP FOR BOTH PRINT AND AUDIO-VISUAL OPERATORS

glance at the list of active print media kept at the publishers' syndicate at the Lebanese Order of the Press shows that there are over 200 periodicals registered and running under non-political licenses. Those with a coveted political license number 30 to 35.

Even more bizarre, is the fact that these figures seem quite modest when compared to the total number of non-political and political licenses on record (including non-opera-

print media does not rely on ad revenue to survive.

The one daily newspaper with a different recent experience could be the purely commercially-driven AL BALAD, which claimed after its first year on the market that its readership reach had grown to nearly 40% of all newspaper readers and over 16% of all Lebanese above 15 years of age. The newspaper said at the end of January that its circulation is

reality of the past five years has been shattering. Publishers could rarely afford to invest in newsroom training or staff increases. Numerous magazines were forced to operate with skeletal editorial staff; and at struggling dailies, one finds veteran journalists who have been denied salary raises for six or more years.

Although professionalism is not entirely lacking from the trade, the facts are discouraging. "Professional

improvements in quality. From the employee perspective, it is a scary job market in professionalism is hard to maintain. Overall, only the most enthusiastic or quality-driven media owners, editors and journalists seemed able to keep their eyes on the task of delivering quality journalism.

Buying and selling

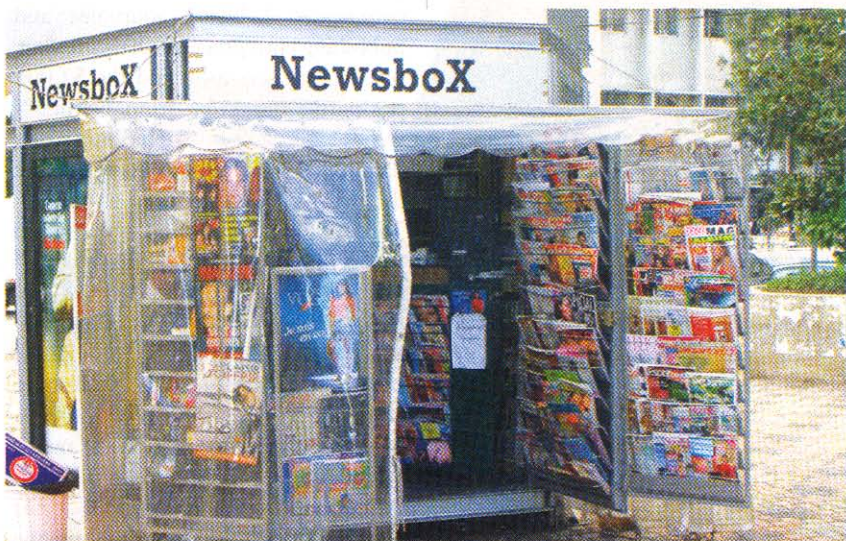
What has not helped the situation is the constant onslaught of partisan

with unwarranted editorial niceties, or they might swing to another version of anti-journalism by refusing to cover newsworthy events at companies if ad space was not secured beforehand. Media outlets lending themselves excessively to such practices did not only drive their own professional reputation down, they also gave the entire realm of journalism an image of disrepute with advertisers.

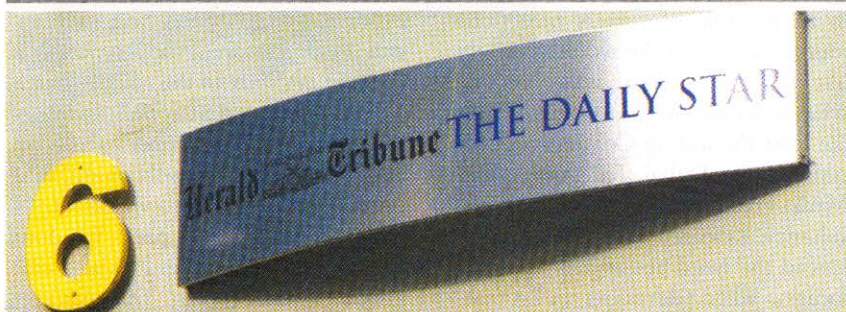
The saving grace for Lebanese journalism in the past used to be that media exhibited a relatively high level of integrity. It may have bowed less or more deeply to political and business interests – but it did not prostrate itself as relentlessly as media in other Arab countries. Journalism practitioners and theoreticians here maintain that Lebanon still enjoys a relatively large margin of press freedom. In the words of Abu-Fadil, the media is "not entirely free but reasonably free."

The diversity of views and open debate of issues in the political publications and audio-visual media indeed continues to thrive around the campfires of Lebanon's intelligentsia, despite the limited number of political licenses and the odd incidence of intimidation, temporary clampdown of publications and arrest of publishers. Although the intrusions were grave, they were not unbearable for the media, maintained one journalist from a family embedded in the national newspaper culture, who added that the most notorious case, the forced closure of television station Murr TV, followed the letter of the media law, indicating more a negligence in drafting of the law than the blatant and willful abuse of it.

However, the diversity of Lebanese media should not be seen as a sector struggling toward Voltaire's ideal. Rather it reflects the multifaceted rivalries of the country's multi-communal society, according to Ramez Maluf, director of the Beirut Institute for Media Arts, a journalism institution also located at the Lebanese American University. In this perception, media might exist in a frame of diversity but is partisan at the core, which hints that many in



Looks can be deceiving: Media might exist in a frame of diversity but is partisan at the core, according to one industry analyst



It's becoming an increasingly tough environment for Lebanese media outlets

journalists do not get support from their employers and novices lack proper basic training," assessed Magda Abu-Fadil, director of the Institute for Professional Journalists at the Lebanese American University. Those local journalists who do shine are usually snapped up by regional or even international news outlets and this further inhibits growth in the local sector.

From the employer perspective, these have been scary years in which survival has taken precedence over

mentalities at media outlets, invading from both business and political angles. The malaise seems almost hereditary in the political press, where more courageous journalists have sometimes admitted that over many years they have seen no escape from prostituting themselves to those in power. But under their economic pressures, newspaper and periodical publishers – who were justifiably worried about their advertising sales – would increasingly succumb to stroking their ad clients

irrational forces powerful enough and perfectly willing to control their existence. This is the kind of thing that revolutionary media does in novels and movies but if it happens at all in real life, it is slow and arduous going. Consequently, the direction of politically effective Lebanese media for some time to come must be expected to be dependent on spe-



cial interests rather than reader interest. In this scenario, the problem of economic interests looks like a temporal nuisance.

Here now is one question to ask: how does this lack of media accountability, transparency and integrity affect media consumers? The obvious answer is it drives intelligent readers and viewers away. This is the moment to shift to a larger horizon, by taking into consideration the situation of the mass media at large and risking another look at the online world and its meaning for the media.

Blog's the word

Check the blog – the current new phenomenon of online communication. Short for web-log, a blog is essentially a personal internet homepage oriented toward ongoing dialogue about topical or personal content. A blog is low-cost, can be continuously updated with material, and alerts the network to new postings. Blogs attracted about 32 million readers in the US in 2004 according to studies published in December (at the same time, 58% of the internet-active US population doesn't know what a blog is).

Blogging rose to fame in the US in 2004, when bloggers uncovered journalistic inaccuracies by mainstream media. Blogging is now being associat-

IF PEOPLE DON'T READ NEWSPAPERS OR MAGAZINES, IT'S BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT INTERESTING ENOUGH

ed with “grassroots” or “participatory” journalism, phrases stipulating that the blog is to the modern individual what Gutenberg's press was to Martin Luther, the door granting entry to publishing.

Blogs will be the absolute thing for perhaps a few years and in the longer perspective, the idea of participatory journalism has yet to answer many questions. But the amazing involvement of bloggers in political and civic responsibility is a contra-indicator to the idea that shrinking newspaper readership (which is a universal experience) can be blamed on the general dwindling of civil virtues.

Remembering the audience

If people don't read newspapers or magazines, it's because they are not interesting enough. Stakeholder

trust is the working capital of any media. It makes a qualitative but perhaps not so much a quantitative difference whether media organizations deny their main stakeholder basis – their audience – because they are stuck on outdated models or are slaves to the desires of special interests.

The future of the media is stakeholder responsibility. All parties have to take their roles and influence more seriously and think of the consequences of what they do. Newspapers, other media and advertising industry have one big, shared responsibility in this: listening to the audience. It may be too idealistic to be for real, but at least in the way of a better vision it could happen that greater demand for quality journalism, formulated eloquently by the very real sophisticated media audiences of Lebanon,

whether using blogs, letters to the editor, or any other means of proactivity in communication, would add significant momentum to the demise of special interest tyranny from the media domain here.

Participatory journalism in this society may open new horizons for journalism and may also become part of an antidote to the economic troubles of media organizations here and elsewhere. The good associate news on the business side is that online advertising – which has once again a positive outlook – and the emergence of corporate blogs in marketing are opening new pathways for media revenues.

NB: For the record, the writer was alerted to the news story on the Azzaman investigation by a blog, maintained by a Lebanese-born academic in California under the name angryarab.