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Crisis Coverage: Spotlight on Arab Media (March 2005 No.69)

EXECUTIVE takes a look at how the Arab media, operating in a partisan environment, covered Lebanon's latest political crisis, beginning with the killing of Rafik Hariri and culminating in the toppling of the government

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Magda Abu Fadil, Michael Karam and Nicholas Blanford examine how the media, operating in a partisan and emotive environment, styled its coverage, beginning with the brutal killing of Rafik Hariri and culminating in the toppling of the government.*

If a week is a long time in politics, then two weeks is an eternity in journalism. While Lebanon may never be the same again, the same could be said for its media. In the space of 14 epoch-forming days, from the killing of Rafik Hariri to the toppling of the Karami government by the so-called Cedar Revolution, Lebanese news coverage, by its reporting, opinion-forming and dialogue, was enjoying its finest hour.

It was never going to be easy. The popular consensus was that Rafik Hariri had been brutally murdered in a bid to silence him and send a message to all those contemplating criticism of the country's ruling elite and their backers. A hot potato if ever there was.

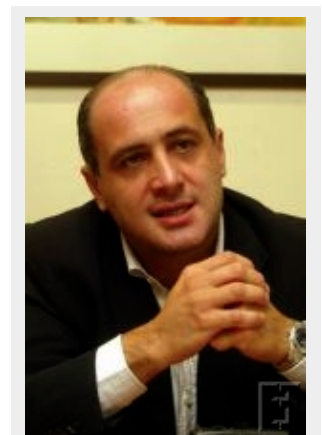
But, cometh the hour, cometh the media. Lebanon's television stations – for so long deemed only capable of serving up silicone-enhanced fluff – found themselves thrust into the bloody limelight, covering political murder and its repercussions under extreme pressures of grief. They did with a rare display of accurate and balanced reporting that had been painfully absent in the recent political mudslinging and finger pointing as Lebanon braced itself for the parliamentary elections that had been scheduled for May.

In a culture with a huge appetite for conspiracy theories it was a relief that the local media held its nerve. Others couldn't resist. Qatar's Al Jazeera TV did its credibility no favors by hinting at outlandish Israeli-backed plots and repeatedly airing a dubious message from a self-styled Islamist group claiming responsibility for Hariri's death. Other stations, including the BBC and CNN, broadcast brief snatches of the tape but were more skeptical about its provenance. Elsewhere, in a bid to capture a whiff of pathos, Al Arabiya dispatched anchor Najwa Qassem to cover the death of her former boss, while Arabic News Broadcast, a relative newcomer did a credible job of covering the event despite lacking the resources of its more established competitors.

Print media had more time to digest the news and turn it into analysis, editorials and background features, while newspapers on opposite sides of the political spectrum were united in their condemnation of the atrocity and uncharacteristically agreeing that it was time for Syria to go. While some elements of the foreign press often resorted to clichés, either out of ignorance or sloth, the local Daily Star finally fulfilled its role as a regional English language paper that provides value-added reporting and weighty editorials. All of which will have found willing online readers, seeking an Arab voice in English. For many however Naharnet, remains the most reactive online resource, even if its fervent allegiance to the Tueni cause may on occasions cloud its objectivity.

It's interesting that while newspapers did not point an accusatory finger at a specific culprit, they diligently reported the displeasure of ordinary Lebanese of all confessions who turned out in droves at the funeral.

On the cyber front, Arab media websites were abuzz with news of the assassination, but mostly mirrored what viewers saw in gruesome video detail. Supplementing the cyber-press were weblogs (blogs) that put forward numerous conspiracy theories about what had happened. It was a reflection of the region's realities, where censorship and low journalistic professional standards has led those hungry for news to seek alternative sources of information. This situation has not been helped by the advent of 24-hour news,



Hosts like LBC's Marcel Ghanem fired up debate

slashed budgets, lower circulation figures and competition from an explosion of satellite channels.

But there may be a ray of hope for Arab journalism. Inspired by unity and driven by the media, a new democracy is seeking to take root. Every day new advances in communication give us more choices, making it easier to act and interact with our environment. With any luck, we may be witnessing a move from partisan to truly national media in Lebanon if the momentum of unity initiated by Hariri's death and the downfall of the government is sustained and professional standards, encouraged by genuine change, become the defining goal for our profession.

The Circus Comes to Town

Lebanon's brushes with the international mass media have been few and far between since the end of the civil war and the release of the last Western hostages in 1991. Only bouts of extreme violence between Hizbullah and Israel, notably in 1996 with Operation Grapes of Wrath and the Israeli withdrawal in May 2000, were to drag the media circus back to Beirut. Otherwise, the stories that Lebanon generated in the 1990s were usually favorable but cliché-ridden reconstruction features on Beirut's "phoenix-like rise from the ashes of war-time devastation."

It was to be the spectacular and brutal murder of the man behind that phoenix that brought the foreign press back to Beirut. The appalling images of burning cars, plumes of black smoke and blood-splattered casualties had foreign news anchors predictably likening the bombing to Lebanon's bloody past and asking whether the civil war was about to resume. However although by the time the people had taken to the street, they had thankfully given up on that particular theme, concentrating instead on the recent phenomenon of people power – as seen in Ukraine and Georgia – and promise of a new democratic dawn in the Middle East.

Other than the handful of foreign correspondents that live in Beirut and jumped on the story immediately, it was not until the following day that the Western media machine cranked into gear and arrived en masse. It included Fox Television's Geraldo Rivera, no doubt catering to what has been referred to as the "guns and ammo" segment of American TV audiences. Rivera is renowned for carrying a gun with which he hoped to shoot Osama bin Laden while reporting in Afghanistan in 2001. He was also famously booted out of Iraq during the US-led invasion for compromising US military security. Enough said.

The major foreign television networks, CNN International's on-the-spot coverage was strong by comparison, helped by the presence of Brent Sadler, and the Arabic-speaking, Cairo-based Ben Wedeman. CNN International even provided live coverage of Hariri's funeral, while most of the mainstream American networks continued with their Michael Jackson obsession.

Sadler's long experience in Lebanon (he reported the civil war and has been permanently based in Beirut since 1997) allowed him to put the assassination into perspective, providing reliable analysis for an international audience rather than glib clichés.

By contrast, Sami Khiyami, Syria's ambassador to London, escaped unscathed from his encounter with the BBC's Hardtalk program (a respected forum in which, as its name suggests, guests are traditionally given a tough half-hour's grilling) on February 23. The BBC interviewer – on this occasion it was not the usually incisive Tim Lewellyn – clearly knew nothing of the relationship between Lebanon and Syria beyond what her researcher had handed her on a piece of paper, and it showed in her faltering and muddled questions.

The English-language foreign print media generally provided reliable coverage of the bombing, its aftermath and the toppling of the Karami government, aided by the fact that most mainstream American newspapers have begun relying increasingly on Arab, or at least Arabic-speaking, reporters, rather than flying in "visiting firemen" with little or no experience of the Middle East. Maybe one day the penny will drop.

*** Magda Abu-Fadil is the director of the Institute for Professional Journalists at the Lebanese American University**