

## Journalists as messengers of hate speech: The case of Lebanon

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**Abstract:** The term “crisis” has become synonymous with describing the political, social, and economic state of many Arab countries including Lebanon. These continuous crises, including a global pandemic, have manifested in Lebanese news and current affairs through messages of hate disseminating via the media and journalists. Hate speech circulated via airwaves and the Internet has been shown to cause more harm than having hate shared in private conversations. The global pandemic, followed by the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, has raised the level of hate speech in public, and Lebanese journalists have been used directly or indirectly as tools for propagating hate speech. This reflective account engages Lebanese journalists with the aim of producing a set of guidelines for tackling hate speech in news coverage and current affairs programs. Two workshops were conducted with Lebanese journalists in Lebanon in an attempt to understand the level of awareness of hate speech and its consequences among Lebanese journalists, assess how they understand hate speech, and determine the importance of guidelines and tools in helping journalists identify and tackle hate speech.

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*Zahera Harb*

# Journalists as Messengers of Hate Speech<sup>1</sup>

The case of Lebanon

## 1 Explosive hate

On August 4, 2020, a few hours after finishing my first workshop with journalists on “hate speech in the Lebanese media in times of crisis” in the offices of the pan-Arab magazine *180 Post* in Beirut, a huge explosion shattered the city, and I was one of its victims. I sustained a few face wounds from broken glass that required sutures, but those visible wounds had little impact compared to the invisible scars the Beirut port explosion left inside every one of us Lebanese people. A sense of despair, anger, and sorrow swept us all. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness overwhelmed us. Personally, that sorrow and anger grew bigger a few days after the explosion when the Lebanese political factions and sect leaders started a war over airwaves and social media as to whom was to blame for the explosion. A war of hate messages erupted that took Lebanon back

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1 This chapter is part of a larger project investigating closely media and journalism practices in Lebanon and Egypt, and the relationship between hate speech and journalism in times of crisis. Passages of this chapter was published in an article the author has written for the Ethical Journalism Network website, of which she is a board member and trustee.

to civil war divisions: Christians versus Muslims and Shia versus Sunni, with the blame mainly falling on the Shia community at large in their generalized and assumed affiliation to Hezbollah. Several journalists took those hate messages to their hearts and became their driving force. Hate speech demonstrated over social media was soon passed onto TV screens and vice versa. The harm caused by the highly divisive rhetoric was transmitted to the homes of millions through journalists, either on purpose or out of ignorance. Hate messages fueled the insecurities among different sectarian communities toward each other.

In the aftermath of the explosion, two scenes dominated the country—one of solidarity demonstrated by the “army of brooms” of volunteers pouring from all over the country to help those affected by the explosion, and another one of hate, gaslit by journalists and media personalities. The despair and anger caused by the explosion seemed to be channeled into hate among many Lebanese against “the other,” rather than against those ruling politicians, who at different stages of the six years the ammonium nitrate was stored in the port knew about the explosive material and its devastating impact if exploded. The extreme hate demonstrated by members of the public on social media disturbed me, but not as much as observing journalists share, write, broadcast, and post hate images and texts while declaring their informed support for those messages. Why are many Lebanese journalists keen on jumping on board of sectarian hate with little attention to what that might cause, including reigniting the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) that took thousands of lives, left thousands with injuries or disabilities, and internally displaced hundreds of thousands? An answer might be related to the fact that Lebanon, as a nation, is still struggling to come to terms with its traumatic past. However, another interpretation might lie within one revelation that came out while discussing the term ‘hate speech’ with Lebanese journalists, which is that many of them were unfamiliar with the term (or at least the Arabic translation of it). In the next section, I will highlight the main findings of the two workshops conducted in Beirut with 15 mid-careers to senior journalists. These workshops raised more questions than answers regarding the definition of hate speech and its implications for journalism and journalists. This chapter ends by introducing some suggestions for tackling hate speech in Lebanese media.

## 2 Beirut hate speech workshops

The lack of a relative understanding of what hate speech is, what it means, and what consequences it entails surfaced during the workshops. There is not one accepted international definition of hate speech, and, according to the Ethical Journalism Network (2015), “the tolerance levels of speech vary dramatically from country to country.” However, the common understanding is whether speech aims to harm others’ harm, “particularly at moments when there is the threat of immediate violence.”

The United Nations included a definition in its “Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech” guidance, published in 2019, understanding hate speech as:

[A]ny kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive (United Nations, 2019).

However, not realizing the framework and the meaning of hate speech, some participants of the workshop raised questions that pointed to very different directions: Is exposing a corrupt politician or civil servant in the absence of a fair and just judiciary system hate speech? Where do journalists draw the line? Should they ignore different international and European definitions of hate speech that speak of hate based on discrimination along race, ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation among others<sup>2</sup>, and define one specifically for Lebanon that would focus more on community cohesion and avoiding sectarian divisions? Should we try to add the need to avoid hate based on class but not include political figures or the ruling ranks? This has led me to question the existence of a link between advocacy journalism, adopted by many journalists in Lebanon, and hate speech, and how it is widely defined. Should we make a clear distinction here between hate speech and advocacy journalism in any hate

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2 For more on hate speech and hate crime evaluation in the EU, see this study: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655135/IPOL\\_STU\(2020\)655135\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655135/IPOL_STU(2020)655135_EN.pdf)

speech definition or just mainly in countries that have a similar political context as Lebanon? These seem to be valid questions that we need to consider while promoting media spaces free from hate throughout the globe, especially under the conditions of non-functioning judiciary systems.

Fifteen journalists from various media outlets (print, broadcast, and online) participated in the workshop discussions. Many of them hinted that they rarely had to think of checking for hate speech in what they produced or wrote. Some shared their frustration with other colleagues who, while covering clashes between different communities within neighboring areas, were not aware of the political history and sectarian nuances of these areas, hence reporting without responsibility and inciting hostility among communities. Social responsibility came across in the workshops as a major need for journalists in Lebanon to consider while reporting. To achieve this, journalists need to stay away from sensational reporting. They need to avoid rushing to publish or broadcast. Some TV journalists in Lebanon believe that serving their political or sectarian sponsor or media organization owners with their writing and news production is, as a matter of fact, a responsible act. This is extended by the tendency of many journalists to be melodramatic, posting extreme and hateful content on social media to enhance their celebrity profiles and get more clicks and followers (“clickbait syndrome,” as identified by the workshop participants).

How do we cut the umbilical cord between journalists and their political and sectarian leaders? How do we convince them that their loyalty as journalists should be to the public and not to their political and sectarian leaders? How do we remind them that being a journalist requires us to be skeptical, especially about our own political and sectarian affiliation? Being skeptical is crucial to detecting hate speech in the Lebanese context. Politicians in Lebanon have been known for using sectarian fears of “the other sect” to ensure their power continuity and preserve their political and economic interests. Accordingly, journalism in Lebanon is being instrumentalized by political institutions (see Harb, 2013; 2019).

Fact-checking is another pertinent need in the Lebanese context to detect and avoid hate speech. The amount of “fake news” that has dominated the media scene (including digital and social media) has flourished, particularly following the Beirut explosion. The Beirut case is a clear example of how fake news generate hate speech. Journalists, as a whole, might not be the source of hate speech, but ignorance of the historical context of the internal conflicts in Lebanon interprets

itself in coverage that incites hate and violence among neighboring sectarian communities. The “five-point test for hate speech,” published by the Ethical Journalism Network (2015), is a good and helpful tool for journalists to use. One of the tool’s points is to test the speakers’ status before quoting them, sharing, or posting their speech.

Knowing the speech reach is also crucial in the Lebanese context, especially with journalists who rush to use tweets or Facebook posts as sources. Identifying the speech reach will help Lebanese journalists realize and detect hate speech in their journalism. Journalists who took part in the workshop discussions in Beirut consistently referred to other journalists’ loyalty to their political and sectarian sponsors as the main obstacle to achieving hate-free reporting. It is true that Lebanon’s media have always operated within proximity to the political sphere editorially and financially (see Dajani, 2019; Harb, 2013; 2019; Richani, 2016), but as in any other nation prone to conflict settings, in the absence of representative and independent journalists’ unions in Lebanon, it is the obligation of journalists to attempt redeeming some of the good journalism Lebanese have demonstrated through tougher times (see Harb, 2011). To achieve this, solidarity among journalists is crucial.

What came out clearly from the workshops with journalists is that there is no clear distinction between polarization, bullying, libel, offensive language, and hate speech. There was little realization that not all polarization, libel, and offensive language can be classified as hate speech, but hate speech very likely involves all of these acts. Many journalists seem to struggle between issues regarding their margin of control over what they write and broadcast, including hate speech. Tools to help them tackle hate speech are important, but for many journalists, the priority lies in not being forced by their bosses to sensationalize their stories or rush into publishing and broadcasting before verifying the authenticity of their story. They are more concerned with their ability to do proper journalism and not become tools in the hands of media bosses who serve their own political and financial agendas. However, journalists are weary of “naming and shaming” politicians for their negligence and corruption, being labeled “hate speech.”

The picture is not completely gloomy, as there are still journalists in Lebanon who stick to good journalism and its role in seeking truth and holding those in power accountable. One such journalist is Edmond Sassine of the Lebanese Broadcast Corporation (LBC). Sassine, in live coverage from a protest spot outside

Beirut following the port explosion, refused to open the airwaves to angry protestors. He was clearly heard on TV instructing his cameraperson not to move close to the protestors while live on air, as he did not want the protestors to use the live broadcast as a tool to channel more hate against other protestors from the opposite political affiliation, who were standing only a few meters away, which might have resulted in clashes erupting again between the two groups after being brought to a still by the Lebanese Army.

### 3 Hate speech in the Lebanese media—an ongoing challenge

Hate speech has been floating across the Lebanese media for some time, with journalists engaging in calls to physically silence those opposing their political views and affiliation. A very flagrant example is the article written by the chief editor of the Lebanese daily *Al Akhbar* newspaper Ibrahim Al Amin, which included direct threats to anti-Hezbollah activists, threatening to wring their necks (Annahar, 2021).<sup>3</sup> The threats that came out in 2012 resurfaced and were linked to the killing of anti-Hezbollah activist Lokman Slim in February 2021 in South Lebanon. Many of Slim’s colleagues and friends saw a direct correlation between the newspaper’s incitement to harm and Slim’s assassination. The danger was linked to a list of names of those labeled as “traitors and collaborators” which was published alongside the threatening article.

Hate speech in the Lebanese media has many facets and is not necessarily bound to inciting political violence. In a fragile state where sectarian tension is high, spreading false news about mischiefs by one sect will generate hate against the accused, which might result in harm not necessarily on the individual level but on the collective level as well. However, we need to emphasize that advocacy journalism, led by investigative journalists in the country, should not be equated with hate speech. Investigations into the corrupt ruling class and their agencies are not a facet of hate speech, as those in power claim in an attempt to clamp down on media freedom. As one workshop participant put it, “In Lebanon, even if you decided not to broadcast or publish one politician’s speech and not the other’s, it will be seen as an act of hate speech.” The scene is so complicated,

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3 There is no direct translation in English of the phrase used in Arabic تحسوساً رقابكم



but the fear is that hate has become the dominant discourse. Journalists are increasingly becoming transmitters of the accumulated political and sectarian rivalry, translated in hate narrative. What is alarming in the Lebanese scene is that journalists may not be aware that they are being used as tools in a war of hate messages between different factions.

This alarming state of affairs of Lebanese journalism reminded me of the two Rwandan journalists sentenced for life in jail “for their roles in fueling the 1994 genocide in which 800,000 Tutsis and Hutus were murdered.” How would a threat to slaughter rival political activists (“wring their necks”), aimed at opposition figures in Lebanon, differ from the Rwandan message that “the graves are not yet full”? What and who would stop these journalists in Lebanon who have willingly or unwillingly become messengers of hate speech?

The given example of calling for murder is not unique in the Lebanese media scene or exists only on one side of the political spectrum. Marcel Ghanem, the host of the Murr Television (MTV) talk show “It is About Time,” has facilitated the spread of many false news about who is responsible and what caused the Beirut port explosion. In one of his episodes following the port tragedy, he built a theory based on a WhatsApp message he received from an anonymous viewer who claimed to have “confirmed insider information.” He does not seem to hesitate to spread any news, even when those stories have not been verified to help implicate Hezbollah. His incitement against the Shia’ political party has evolved to become incitement against the Shia’ sect collectively in Lebanon.

Hate speech in Lebanon is not restricted to political and sectarian rivalry. The Syrian and Palestinian refugees have been the target of hate campaigns led by media organizations, fueled by journalists and demonstrated themselves, for example, by curfews imposed on Syrian refugees in many Lebanese villages or by equating Palestinians in Lebanon with the deadly Coronavirus (Khalil, 2020).

Many attempts have taken place over the years, mainly in the 21st century, to bring the Lebanese media to recognize hate speech as a contrast to their social responsibility role as journalists, including those initiated by the Maharat Foundation in Lebanon<sup>4</sup> and the Ethical Journalism Network in 2014 and 2016.

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4 Maharat is a Lebanese NGO, established by a group of Lebanese journalists; it advocates the values of freedom of expression and respect for human rights in Lebanon. <http://www.maharatfoundation.org/en>

Further, the “Media Ethical Code for Promoting Civil Peace,” facilitated by the Maharat and launched on June 25, 2013, by the “UNDP Peace-Building Project in Lebanon,” was signed by 13 different Lebanese media organizations.<sup>5</sup> The initiative succeeded in raising awareness, but its impact had washed out at first signs of political tension in the country. Hence, the focus needs to be shifted to raising awareness among journalists themselves on the individual level in hopes that it might bring change on the collective level.

#### 4 Suggestions for tackling hate speech

As mentioned earlier, not all journalists are forces of hate speech in Lebanon. Those who took part in the Beirut workshops in August believed in the need to avoid and tackle hate speech, and in the need for ethical reporting free of hate. Nevertheless, to achieve this, an assessment and redefinition of the core principles of journalism in Lebanon are required. Combating hate speech should be at the top of those role redefinitions. Meanwhile, Lebanese journalists need to realize that negative speech is not hate speech. Hate language and discourse can incite harm. Disinformation generates hate that incites harm. To fact-check, to not rush to publish or broadcast, to be sensitive to sectarian vulnerabilities, and to educate oneself of Lebanon’s civil war history and geography to avoid triggering new hostilities between different communities have become necessary steps Lebanese journalists need to consider to avoid disseminating hate speech during times of crisis. Hate speech in the Lebanese context is speech that leads to harm, speech that is based on unverified and fabricated information, speech that uses sensational inflammatory language, and speech that feeds enmities among different publics.

The situation in Lebanon proves that there is a need to establish and implement a definition of hate speech that would take into account the socio-cultural and political context more strongly. Other countries in a similar situation of polarization could benefit from such definition. The Lebanese context is not unique, and journalists in similar political settings need to set some time aside to reflect on their profession and to be clear on defining their role as journalists in the society. This becomes even more crucial in times of crisis.

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5 For more on this initiative, visit <http://www.maharatfoundation.org/en/talkshows>

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