

# Lebanese media and the dilemma of paywalls

**Dima Danawi**

DPhil student at Saint Joseph University, Beirut, in Infocom, Social Science Department, third year; Topic of research: Journalists in Lebanon at the digital era, trajectories and conversions.  
Lecturer at University of Balamand, MASS COM department, main campus (Koura).

## Abstract

*The dilemma of paywalls\* is a worldwide debate. In fact, implementing a paywall can make the website and hence the media very prosperous. But also implementing a paywall could affect the way and the means that connect you to your audience.*

*Therefore, once putting in a gateway, management and decision makers should make sure they absolutely trust the impact the paywall will have on their operations, as the stakes at play are even more dangerous than they might realize.*

*Experts advise that there are three conditions that a media institution must meet before adding a paywall. Lebanon's media has its own specificity in this regard, and we herein describe the obstacles to the success of any paywall on media institutions in Lebanon.*

*Keywords: paywall; media;*

*\*paywall: (on a website) is an arrangement whereby access is restricted to users who have paid to subscribe to the site.*

## Methodology

This research aims to shed light on the dilemma of paywalls in Lebanese media institutions. For that purpose, it has used qualitative research. Hence an active visual discourse analysis of select leading media as they take the step and go online and struggle with the dilemma of adding paywalls or not. And content analysis of in depth interviews with political journalists and their opinions about the same phenomenon.

This research comes to light as the dilemma of paywalls on media institutions sites is subject to research and has intrigued many scholars around the world into looking into it.

## Theoretical framework

Phenomenography, developed by Marton (1986) as a qualitative research theoretical framework, is presented. Phenomenography is the empirical study of the different ways in which people think of the world. In other words, its aim is to discover the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, realize and understand various aspects of phenomena in the world around them (Martin et al., 1992). In phenomenographic research, the researcher chooses to study how people experience a given phenomenon, in

## ***Lebanese media and the dilemma of paywalls***

this case the paywalls on the media sites and not to study a given phenomenon. Marton (1986) and Booth (1997) described phenomenography as:

‘Phenomenography is focused on the ways of experiencing different phenomena, ways of seeing them, knowing about them and having skills related to them. The aim is, however, not to find the singular essence, but the variation and the architecture of this variation by different aspects that define the phenomena’ (Walker, 1998).

### **Lebanese media and the dilemma of paywalls**

The dilemma of paywalls is a worldwide debate. Experts advise that there are three conditions that a media institution must meet before adding a paywall. Lebanon’s media has its own specificity in this regard, and we herein describe the obstacles to the success of any paywall on media institutions in Lebanon.

The media scene in Lebanon is restless. Its institutions face many dilemmas while adapting to the internet era. Some of them are shutting down, such as the newspaper Al Safir or even Future TV, on the 18/9/2019. Others have declared bankruptcy, like the famous publishing house Dar Al Sayad. However, some are adapting and building new models online, like the newspaper Al Nahar, available online at [annahar.com](http://annahar.com), or Al Akhbar, available online at [Al-Akhbar.com](http://Al-Akhbar.com), and the television stations MTV or LBCI, available online at [MTV.com.lb](http://MTV.com.lb) and [LBCI.com](http://LBCI.com). Some have even launched applications so that mobile access is also covered. And yet, others, have even relaunched in both paper and online versions simultaneously, such as Nida’ Al Watan.

Although these institutions would have ordinarily relied on funding from the gulf countries, from the advertising industry and even sometimes from the political parties that they represent, this situation has changed.

The gulf countries now have their own media, and hence do not need the Lebanese media to speak on their behalf. In addition, Lebanon’s advertising budget has undergone significant cuts since the country is in financial crisis. Moreover, its politicians seem unenthusiastic to fund even their own media and instead use Twitter heavily. Certain media are still funded by politicians with certain ambitions but they are more the exception than the rule.

Hence, and for the new sites that are currently online, they need to turn towards the only available means of income: memberships and donations. Thus, to go through the challenge of creating an online model that is able to convince consumers and readers to pay for it.

And here we present the dilemma of the paywalls. If we place a paywall then we risk losing audience. But also, a media institution needs financial income to survive.

Therefore certain media institutions in Lebanon have decided to add a paywall for access. After all, since producing information costs money, it is only natural for the consumers to pay for it.

This has been the approach taken by the television stations Al Jadeed and LBCI, as well as the newspaper Al Nahar. To access their online content, the readers must pay a subscription fee. Meanwhile, other media in Lebanon have not taken this approach and remain open and free. For example, let us consider the dailies Al-Akhbar.com, Aliwaa.com.lb and Nidaalwatan.com that remains accessible and free of charge online; and as far as television is concerned, MTV.com and Al Manar.com are still gratis.

The experts (Christensen et al., 2012) and the experiences of international media such as The Guardian (Amol, 2019) and The New York Times (BENTON, 2019) have demonstrated that there are three interrelated conditions that a new online model must follow in order to qualify for a successful paywall and attract memberships and donations

### **1-Media institutions must have a strong identity online and not practice neutral journalism (Skok, 2012)**

Almost all of the Lebanese media outlets have a strong identity. Moreover, they often represent a confession, a religious affiliation, and a declared political party. For instance, the newspaper Al Akhbar is pro-Hezbollah, as is Al Manar television; both are representatives of the Shiite branch of Islam and their logos are yellow, like the flag of Hezbollah. The television station OTV represents the Aoun party, the party of Michel Aoun, nowadays President of the Republic, a party affiliated with the Maronite Church, and its logo is orange, like the logo of the party. The MTV and LBCI television stations have a Christian identity, but take a more subtle approach with regard to political parties' affiliations, aiming instead at a more global Christian audience. Al Nahar and Nida' al Watan newspapers represent the March 14 movement, an uprising that ousted the Syrians from Lebanon after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

### **2-Media institutions should understand that the financial relationship between paying for access on the site and the cost of producing editorial is not transitional (Christensen et al., 2012, p12)**

Consumers will not pay to access information simply because it costs money to produce. The relationship between the cost of production and the pay is not transitional. (Christensen et al., 2012, p12)

Media institutions should have a mission that consumers support enough to be willing to pay for. This is the challenge for many of the Lebanese media institutions, such as one of the most important traditional media outlets, Al Nahar, and to its online model, annahar.com.

Citing this newspaper as an example seems natural, since not only it is one of the oldest newspapers in Lebanon, but it was also founded by the godfathers of Lebanese journalism: Gebran Tueni, and then his son Ghassan, and then his grandson Gebran, who was assassinated. "The paper's editorials had once the power to overrule the government." (Graieb, 2018).

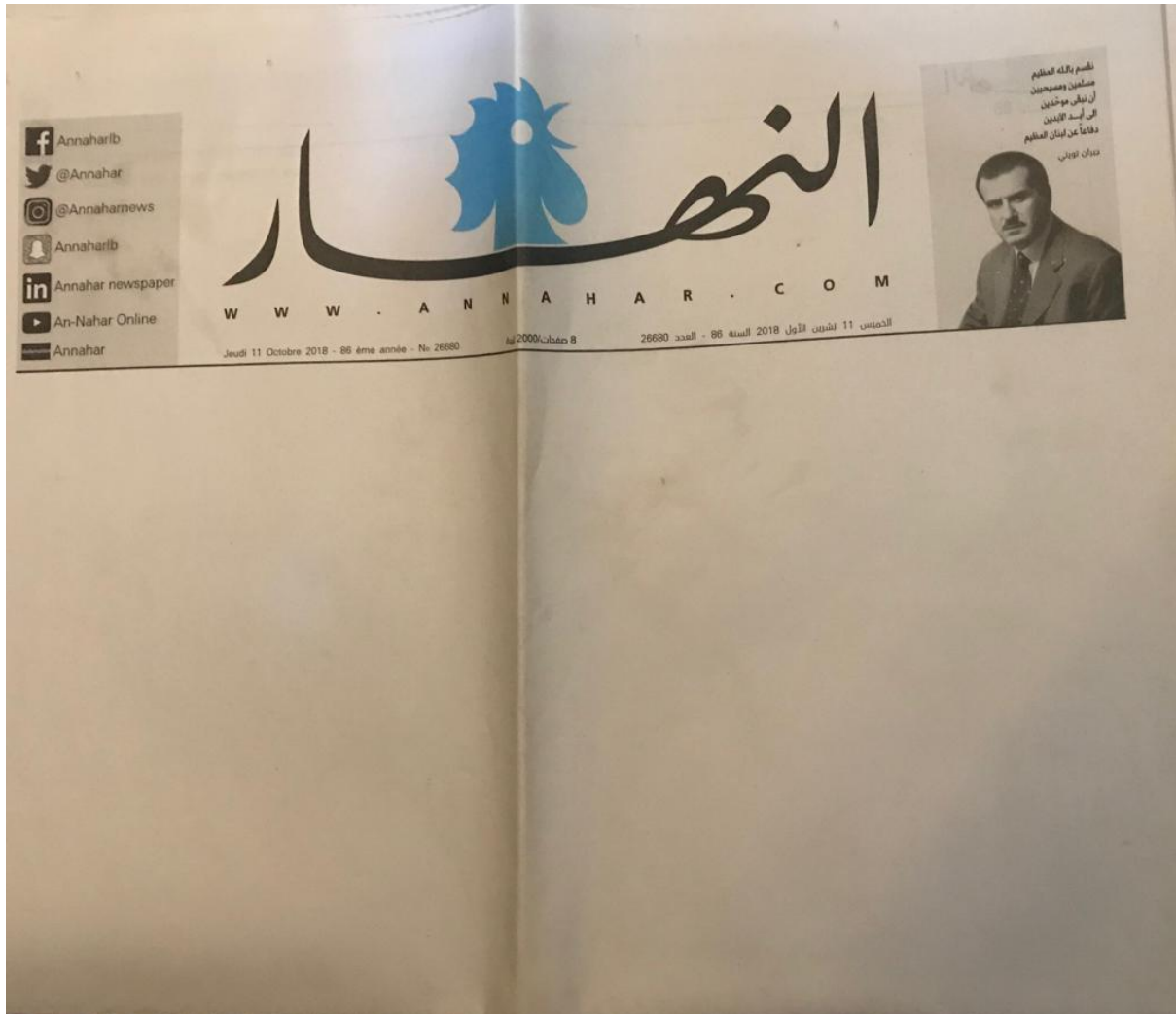
Today, Nayla Tueni, the daughter of Gebran, is at the top of Al Nahar and faces the challenges of the digital era. She has kept the paper and is still printing and yet has adapted the paper's business model to one based on online media with a paywall. For this model to work and attract memberships, the paper should have a mission that consumers will support. Garnering support for the mission of Al Nahar and annahar.com is not an easy task, as there is public disillusionment about the cause of the March 14 movement.

This disillusionment is not only found in the public but even in Nayla Tueni herself, who decided on the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2018 to publish a blank newspaper, without any articles, editorials or photos "Please see fig 1". It was her way of calling for a government to form in support of Prime Minister Hariri, a symbol of the March 14

## *Lebanese media and the dilemma of paywalls*

movement, who had been unable for months to rally all of the forces and parties around him and form the Cabinet. —

The newspaper, however, was still sold at 2,000 LL, double the price of other newspapers, and the website still had a paywall.



**Figure 1**

The evaluation of this marketing coup is debatable, yet we cannot be precise about the newspaper's turnover, as the figures are unavailable. However, as far as the mission is concerned, the message was clear: Al Nahar and annahar.com were on the side of the March 14 movement.

This mission was amplified a few months later when Prime Minister Hariri headed the editorial team of the newspaper. He was optimistic about a new government, launching the slogan, 'Time to work, we want to save Lebanon' "Please see figure 2".



Figure 2

This issue contained many advertising pages, and the newspaper must have made a profit for the day. As far as memberships are concerned, it is difficult to determine the number of people who were willing to pay to remove the paywall to read the editorials for this day, as such information has not been made public and stays confidential.

And yet Nayla did not give up on her mission of promoting the newspaper; she visited university campuses, inviting the youth to attend lectures on the most popular subject for them: unemployment “Please see figure 3”. While introducing the speakers, she distributed free annual annahar.com memberships among the students.

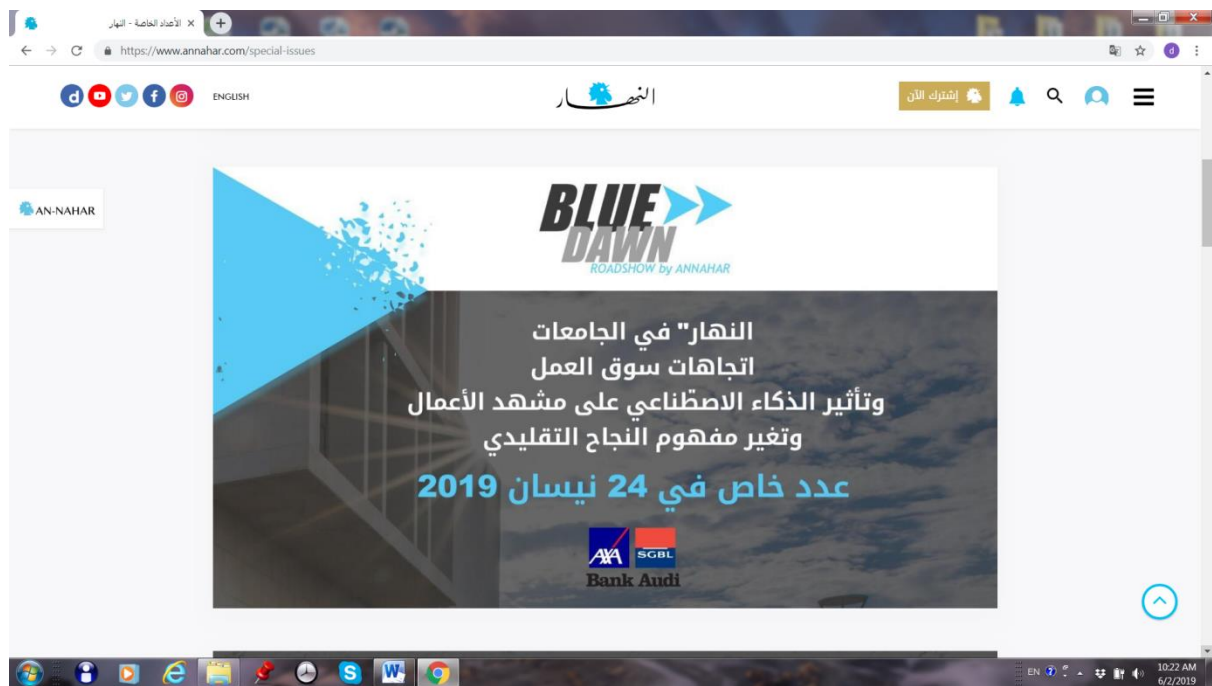


Figure 3

The success of her mission at universities is also not measurable scientifically, as the needed information is also missing. In addition, in Lebanon no media institution is willing to open its books, as doing so would endanger such institutions' only certain income: advertising. However, regardless of profit, Nayla managed to bring awareness to her brand among the millennials (i.e., those born in and after the year 2000).

Are these marketing coups sufficient to attract consumers to support the mission of Al Nahar? Are consumers willing to pay a membership fee in order to cross the paywall of annahar.com? This is where the challenge lies. The experts and the experiences of other media models are clear: consumers pay for a mission.

As the founder of Daraj.com and reputed journalist Hazem Al Amin asserts “The crowds that once followed the March 14 movement and took to the streets to oust the Syrian army are now divided. Some now support other missions, while others who believed that they could create a better Lebanon have become disillusioned. The hope and trust that they had in the political figures of the March 14 movement have gone, and since political media is a reflection of the political scene, so too has their belief in supporting the mission of Al Nahar and its new business model, annahar.com.”(Al Amin, 2019)

The only hope for media institutions is to return to their roots by providing genuine independent journalism by escaping the polarization in which it is currently entrenched and perhaps then adding a paywall “Please see figure 4”. -



Figure 4

However, this is not the challenge of annahar.com only; all of the Lebanese media are on the same mission to always be ‘right’. Even new outlets present themselves as missionaries, a third voice (Daraj.com), or even that together, we can save the freedom of the press (Rasseef22.com). For instance, the recently relaunched newspaper, Nida’ al Watan, has presented itself as being ‘more than a newspaper, a mission!’”Please see figure 5”

ADVERTISEMENT



Figure 5

This mission can be problematic for certain media institutions. Every one of them represents a political party and/or a religious confession. Moreover, since the March 14 (anti-Syrian) uprising and the manifestation of the (pro-Syrian and Hezbollah) March 8 Alliance, the media's reflection of the political scene has become bipolar. Many consumers have become disillusioned with politics and politicians, and are not ready to pay to support their missions. We should note at this stage that the people who originally supported the March 14 movement are today more divided and disappointed than the supporters of March 8.

Experts have insisted that people are unwilling to pay for a mission that does not convince them (Christine, 2019). This could explain the fact that the media that supported the Future movement (a symbol of the March 14 movement) are suffering financially more than others. For instance, Future TV, the television station of Prime Minister Hariri, was shut down on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019, after being unable to pay its employees' salaries. Annahar.com and Al Nahar have not apparently paid their employees for 22 months.

Hence, if Al Manar television and Al-Akhbar.com, the two Hezbollah media institutions, were to add a paywall, and ask their readers to support their mission financially, they would likely be successful. Because their followers probably still believe in their mission.



However, one of the reasons why many of the media institutions are not adding a paywall, is that it would hinder their primary purpose: propaganda. As one famous journalist confirms “all of our media is propaganda” (Naoum, 2019)

. Or another one adds, comparing the media scene to the era of the Lebanese civil war, “they remind me of the barricades that once divided Beirut where would hide the parties and the religious confession to shoot at each other” (Nassif, 2019).

### 1-Media institutions should ask consumers for money (Christensen, 2012)

Consumers need to know why media institutions require their support, as the general public does not necessarily understand the problems of a media institution, and it is a task that is more complex than implementing a paywall.

For instance, LBCI.com, Al Jadeed.com and annahar.com suddenly implemented a paywall in 2019, without explanation to its public why they needed to pay for access “Please see figure 6 and 7”.

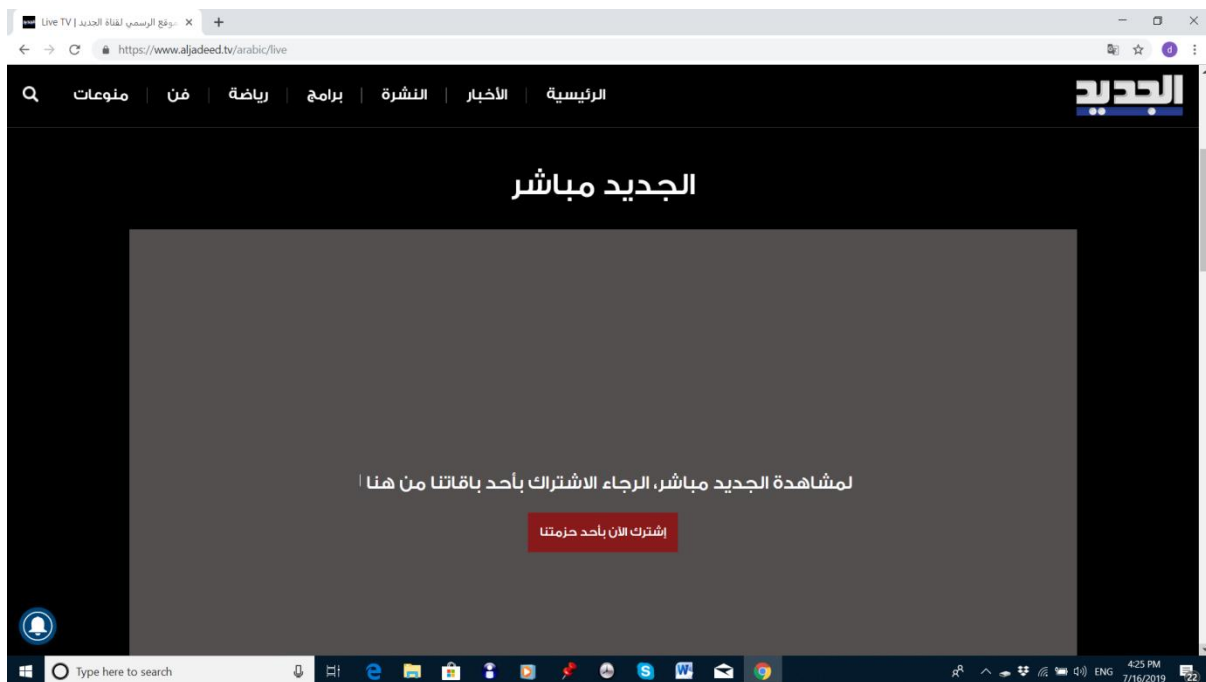


Figure 6



Figure 7

Annahar.com has added a premium service to its access. Hence, readers must pay at least one dollar to read the content of the day. The word ‘premium’ reminds us of the Guardian’s ‘premium’ project, and the amount is the same, one Dollar. However, the essence of the Guardian’s concept was to give its readers the option to pay, and it did not make this an essential requirement. When the Guardian added a paywall, it gave its readers the choice of supporting its mission or not “Please see figure 8”. And this is what made it successful. “For once the Guardian is not losing money anymore.”(Benton, 2019)

### **Since you're here...**

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading and supporting our independent, investigative reporting than ever before. And unlike many news organisations, we have chosen an approach that allows us to keep our journalism accessible to all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford.

The Guardian is editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias and not influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one edits our editor. No one steers our opinion. This is important as it enables us to give a voice to those less heard, challenge the powerful and hold them to account. It's what makes us different to so many others in the media, at a time when factual, honest reporting is critical.

Every contribution we receive from readers like you, big or small, goes directly into funding our journalism. This support enables us to keep working as we do - but we must maintain and build on it for every year to come. **Support The Guardian from as little as \$1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**



**Figure 8**

However, in Lebanon, and in 2019, LBCI.com added a sudden paywall at \$4.99 (USD) per month for its online news bulletin “Please see figure 9”.

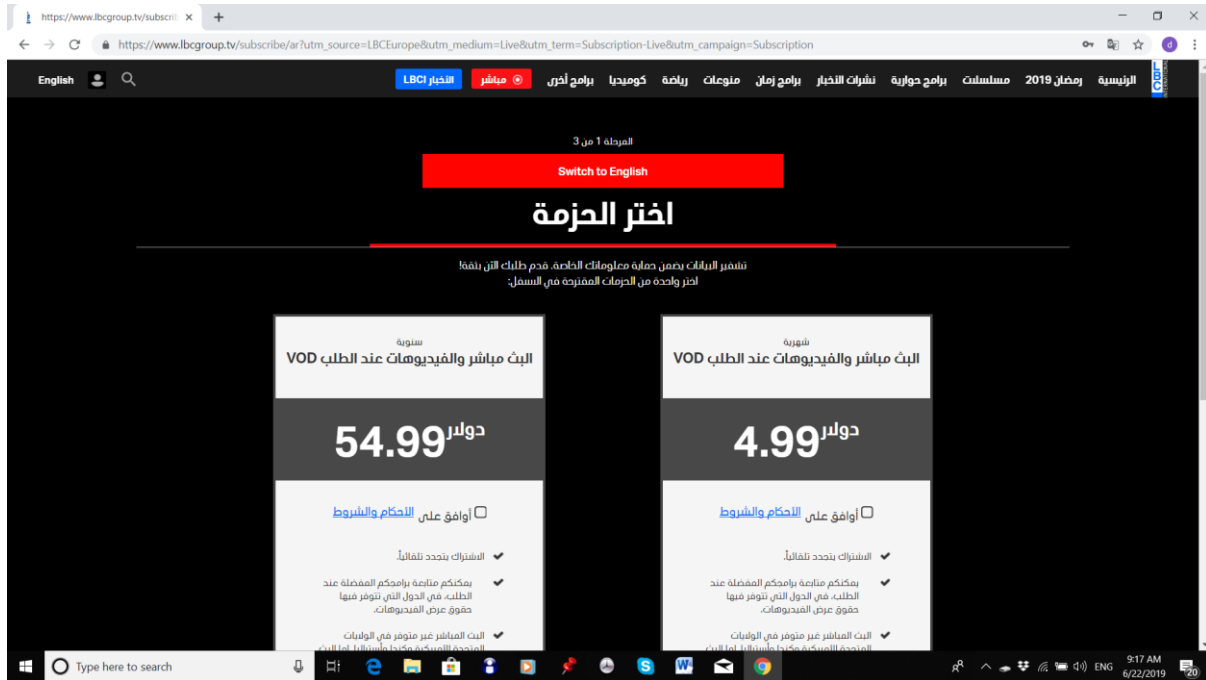


Figure 9

To watch the news bulletin of the day, there is no way out, no choice, you have to pay for access.

However, there is one site in Lebanon that is currently campaigning and giving its followers the choice to subscribe. Raseef 22 requests the financial support of its readers but does not make this an essential requirement; consumers are given the option to support ‘independent media’ (as Raseef 22 presents itself) or not “Please see figure 10 and 11”.

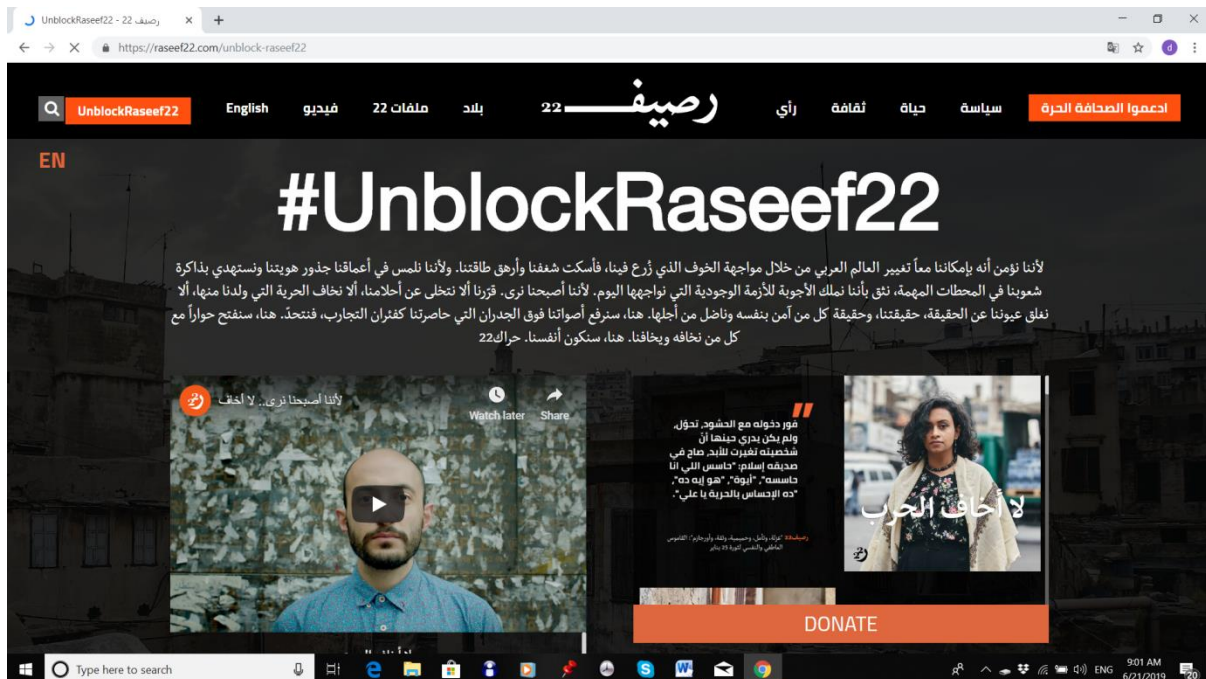


Figure 10



Figure 11

Thus, politely asking for consumers' support is probably a better idea than an abrupt paywall, as a sudden obligation to pay might dissuade readers, who will simply visit other sites that are available for free. It will at least avoid losing audience. Asking for support and giving the audience the choice to give it or not is a safer strategy. The results are yet to be determined for raseef22.com, as the founder reports that "the Lebanese do not yet have the maturity to pay online." (Abbas, 2019)

### **Culture eats strategy for breakfast (Christensen et al., 2012, p4)**

Throughout history, Lebanese media institutions have relied on financing from the gulf, political donations and advertising. They have failed to cultivate in their readers the idea of paying for reading. In addition, free newspapers have created a competition that traditional institutions have been unable to resist. For instance, Al-Balad distributed its papers for free in coffee shops and businesses following the strategy of the free UK newspaper Metro: the more readers the more advertising. Al Nahar and many other institutions followed this strategy, competing for the audience and hence the advertising and distributed their newspaper for free on coffee-shops and businesses. They did not resist the current of free.

For certain political journalists, the risk of the paywall is a question of habit; paying online by credit card is a habit that Lebanese have yet to acquire (Abbas, 2019).

A generalization when we consider the youth who probably do in fact make online payments. But perhaps this statement applies when we refer to paying online to consume media. As instead of paying 4,9usd to subscribe to LBCI news bulletin, the youth would prefer subscribing to Netflix for, affirm my students as University of Balamand.

In conclusion, media institutions in Lebanon must consider how to innovate and find missions that people will support and for which they are willing to pay. Consumers pay not only to access a news bulletin and read political analysis but also to support a mission. The Guardian experience proves it.

They should also consider how to foster the culture of membership in millennials by having missions that the youth will support. As the youth is the future, media outlets ought to “reinstating their confidence in journalism and work on reconquering their confidence in journalism” affirms one journalist, (Abi Saab, 2019). On that note he adds, “for that mission and culture to be successful, media institutions require effective communication between editorial and marketing teams”.

Finally, before the head of a media enterprise considers adding a paywall, he or she should first establish whether the work that the enterprise supplies is extraordinary and likely to satisfy consumers’ needs, especially when others provide the same service for free. (Christensen et al., 2012, p16)

### **Bibliography and Webography**

Abbas H, founder and editor in chief of [www.rasseef22.com](http://www.rasseef22.com), one on one interview

Abi Saab P, 2019, political journalist at Al-Akhbar, one on one interview

Al Amin H, 2019, founder and editor of [www.daraj.com](http://www.daraj.com), one on one interview

Amol R (2019) Guardian records first operating profit since 1998. Available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48111464> (accessed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2019)

Benton J (2019). *Nieman Lab Report*. Available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/05/want-to-see-what-one-digital-future-for-newspapers-looks-like-look-at-the-guardian-which-isnt-losing-money-anymore/?relatedstory> (accessed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2019)

Christine S (2019). Who works best in a revenue development role? Here’s what these local news organizations have found. *Nieman lab report*, 13 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/08/who-works-best-in-a-revenue-development-role-heres-what-these-local-news-organizations-have-found/> (accessed the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2019)

Christensen M C, Skok D, Allworth J. Breaking news, be the disruptor, *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2012, vol166, no3, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. Available at: <https://niemanreports.org/books/be-the-disruptor/> (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2019)

Graieb I, 2018, Editor in Chief, L’ Orient Le Jour, one on one interview

Home page, Available at: <http://www.daraj.com> (accessed the 17<sup>th</sup> of february 2019)

Home page, Available at: <http://www.raseef22.com>, (accessed the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2019)

Nassif N, journalist at Al Akhbar, 2019, one on one interview

Naoum , journalist at Al Nahar 2019, one on one interview

Ornek, F. (2008). An overview of a theoretical framework of phenomenography qualitative education research: An example from physics education research. *Asia - Pacific Forum on Science Learning and Teaching*, 9(2), 1-14.

*Lebanese media and the dilemma of paywalls*

Skok D. Finding a way forward, Breaking news, be the disruptor, *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2012, vol66, no3, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. Available at: <https://niemanreports.org/books/be-the-disruptor/> (accessed 4th of January 2019)