

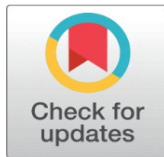


FRAGMENTED REALITIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PARTISAN FRAMING IN LEBANESE TELEVISION TALK SHOWS

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ABSTRACT

Under the conditions of extreme plurality of political and ideological positions in the media space, the Lebanese television system also becomes not a single public space but a producer of parallel realities. The phenomenon of Echo Chamber that is discussed in this paper refers to Lebanese talk shows that is to say, the talk shows of MTV, Al-Jadeed, and Al-Manar and how the perceptions of the people regarding systemic state failure are disaggregated through partisan framing. The analysis of Interpretive Polarization of the causes of the national crisis based on comparative framing analysis and the survey of 200 Lebanese young people is the focus of the study. The results express that on one hand, there is an actual existence of a nominal "Public Agenda" and on the other hand, the causal attribution of the economic collapse was diametrically opposite along the channel audiences (correlation=0.67 correlation=0.67). Whereas readers of MTV place emphasis on inner-institutional breakdown, viewers to Al-Manar emphasize outer-geopolitical pressures, and those of Al-Jadeed place emphasis on populist anti-establishment. The analysis summarizes that media addiction in Lebanon strengthens the social divisions that already exist in the country such that it turns a unified national crisis into unraveled partisan discourses that are not susceptible to a civic identity solution.

Keywords: Al-Jadeed, Television Talk Shows, Anti-Establishment

1. INTRODUCTION: ARCHITECTURE OF POLARIZATION

The media system has extended its conventional function of distributing news to be a constructive force of Fragmented Realities in the modern Lebanese context. The media system is not an instrument of organization in a failing state, where a moribund national narrative is failing. Rather, the stiff rivalry between outlets such as MTV, Al-Jadeed and Al-Manar to create an impression among people has led to the existence of what can be termed as Interpretive Walls. Although all these channels report on the same objective events, i.e., the economic collapse and the Beirut Port explosion, they use a set of affected partisan frames that determine not only what people think about it but also how they hold the blame of the disaster.

Research Problem: The current study investigates the Echo Chamber Paradox: in an age where the system is crashing down and last minute one should have assumed an intellectual consensualism within the people, the Lebanese media ecosystem has merely made people even more cognitive siloed. The issue is that the political and religious backgrounds of these channels brings the effect of Interpretive Polarization as various strata of the youth population live in parallel intellectual worlds, and they cannot come to an agreement on the most basic causes of their mutual suffering.

Research Question: How much does the framing by partisan media in Lebanese talk shows generate diametrically opposite cognitive models of what caused the economic and political crisis among the Lebanese youths?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: PARTISAN FRAMING AND COGNITIVE SILOS

The recent scholarship has changed its focus on the general media impact to the investigation of how partisan media divides the opinion of the population by blocking the views with frames.

2.1. MEDIA PLURALISTIC CONFLICT

The study of the media sector in fractured societies shows that plurality of the media tends to enhance sectarian conflicts instead of promoting the democratic debate. Farhat (2015) considered the situation in Lebanon and discovered that sectarian satellite channels do not simply provide news but create Sectarian Interpretive Frameworks. This study proved that listening to channels such as MTV and Al-Manar have a strong association with sectarian attitudes of the viewer because each channel offers different national events a specific location of moral geography.

2.2. JUVENILE AND THE VERIFICATION CRISIS

The youth is especially vulnerable to the Echo Chamber effect in high-stress environments. Al-Omari (2020) observed that, although the youth rely on media to fact-check the news, they tend to choose media that supports the preexisting bias, which creates a cycle of verification whereby partisan rumors are propagated by partisan institutional media. This is supported by Al-Shahat (2024), who discovers that audiences choose to use the particular frames of their favorite talk shows to understand complex socio-political issues, thereby reducing their mental space to one partisan position.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FRAMING AND INTERPRETIVE POLARIZATION

This study utilizes **Framing Theory** (Entman/Goffman) as the primary lens to analyze how Lebanese media defines the "causes" of state failure.

3.1. THE FUNCTIONAL ROLE OF PARTISAN FRAMING

Framing is the process of selecting specific aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text (Al-Dulaimi, 2016, p. 185). In the Lebanese context, framing serves three functions:

- **Causal Attribution:** Defining who is responsible for the economic collapse.
- **Moral Evaluation:** Labeling specific political actors as "saviors" or "villains."
- **Treatment Recommendation:** Suggesting solutions that favor the channel's political allies (Hamdi, 2023, p. 413).

3.2. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND ECHO CHAMBERS

The study applies the concept of **Interpretive Polarization**, where the media system facilitates the avoidance of "Cognitive Dissonance." In a failing state, individuals seek media that provides a "comfortable" explanation for their suffering—one that blames the "other" sectarian or political camp while absolving their own (Al-Hajj, 2020, p. 147). This creates a structural dependency on partisan media that fragments the public agenda into silos (Sakhawi, 2021, p. 163).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: COMPARATIVE SILO ANALYSIS

This study employs a **comparative descriptive approach** to measure the gap between the interpretive realities of different channel audiences.

4.1. VARIABLE DEFINITION

- 1) **Independent Variable: Partisan Media Selection:** Measures the specific choice of channel (MTV vs. Al-Jadeed vs. Al-Manar) as the primary information source.
- 2) **Dependent Variable: Interpretive Polarization:** Measures the degree of difference in how audiences explain the causes of the economic crisis (Internal vs. External blame).
- 3) **Mediating Variable: Causal Attribution Framing:** The specific narrative used by the talk show to define the crisis (e.g., "The US Sanctions" vs. "The Local Corruption").

4.2. CATEGORIES OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

To quantify the "Interpretive Gap," the study analyzes the following categories across the three programs (Al-Dulaimi, 2016, p. 185):

- **The "Villain" Category:** Who is identified as the primary cause of the crisis?
- **The "Solution" Category:** What action is proposed (e.g., IMF deal vs. "Look East")?
- **The "Emotional Tone":** Is the framing designed to incite anger at the government or fear of external enemies?

The data reveals that the "Public Agenda" in Lebanon is not a single hierarchy of issues, but a series of **Interpretive Silos**. While all respondents agreed that the "Economic Crisis" was the most salient topic, their understanding of what *caused* that crisis was contingent upon their media selection.

5. CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION AND THE ECHO CHAMBER EFFECT

The study measured how the three channels utilize **Partisan Framing** to attribute blame for state failure. The results, summarized in Table 1, show that the audience's mental reality is a mirror of their chosen channel's editorial policy (Al-Jamal, 2014).

Table 1

Table 1 Causal Attribution Framing and Audience Alignment			
Primary Information Source	Primary Cause of Crisis (Viewer Attribution)	Solution Preferred by Audience	Correlation (ρ)
MTV (Sar al-Waqt)	Internal Frame: Local Corruption / Institutional Failure	Global Frame: Radical Change / Western Integration	0.68
Al-Manar (Hadith al-Sa'a)	External Frame: US Sanctions / Economic Siege	Resistance Frame: Look East / Resistance Economy	0.61
Al-Jadeed (Wahalaq Sho?)	Populist Frame: Collective Elite Failure ("All of them")	Legal Frame: Populist Accountability / Asset Recovery	0.64

5.1. ANALYSIS OF THE MTV SILO: THE "INTERNAL VILLAIN" NARRATIVE

The investigation found that youth who primarily follow MTV exhibit a strong **Internal Attribution Frame** ($\rho=0.68$). For this cohort, the ambiguity of the economic collapse is resolved by identifying the local ruling class and state institutions as the sole "villains." This framing creates a cognitive preference for solutions based on global integration and international oversight. The high correlation indicates that MTV successfully sets an agenda where "External Sanctions" are made invisible, focusing public anger entirely on domestic mismanagement (Hamdi, 2023, p. 413).

5.2. ANALYSIS OF THE AL-MANAR SILO: THE "GEOPOLITICAL SIEGE" NARRATIVE

Conversely, Al-Manar viewers operate within a diametrically opposed **External Attribution Frame** ($\rho=0.61$). For these respondents, the economic crisis is not a result of local failure but an intentional "Economic War" waged by foreign powers. This framing resolves social ambiguity by transforming suffering into a form of "Resistance." Consequently, the preferred solutions (e.g., "Looking East") are direct results of the channel's geopolitical framing rather than an objective analysis of economic data (Al-Hajj, 2020, p. 147).

5.3. ANALYSIS OF THE AL-JADEED SILO: POPULIST COLLECTIVE BLAME

Al-Jadeed represents a "Third Way" of framing, where blame is attributed to the **Collective Elite** without exception. This **Populist Frame** ($\rho=0.64$) leads to a public agenda focused on judicial accountability and "Legal Outrage." While this avoids the binary of MTV vs. Al-Manar, it creates a silo of generalized anger that often lacks a specific structural solution, leading to high levels of **Behavioral Activation** (protests) but low levels of **Policy Clarity** (Kim, 2020, p. 15).

5.4. THE MIRROR OF FRAGMENTATION: EFFICIENCY WITHOUT UNITY

The data reveals a significant paradox: the Lebanese public has achieved consensus on the **salience** of the crisis (what to think about) but has reached total polarization on its **causality** (how to think about it). As noted by Sakhawi (2021, p. 163), in a state of structural collapse, the public experiences "Acute Information Hunger." Because the Lebanese state has failed to provide a centralized, credible narrative for the financial ruin, youth have entered a state of **Structural Dependency** on partisan outlets.

The result is that the "Mirror Effect" of the media does not reflect a single national agenda; instead, it reflects the **Cognitive Partitioning** of the country. Youth are not navigating a single state failure; they are navigating three different versions of it, curated by the editorial boards of MTV, Al-Manar, and Al-Jadeed. This lack of a "common set of facts" creates a cognitive barrier that prevents a unified civic response to the crisis.

5.5. TRUTH BY REMOTE CONTROL: THE DEATH OF OBJECTIVE SALIENCE

The investigation confirms that "Truth" in Lebanon has become a function of **Partisan Selection**. As established by Hamade (2019, p. 213), the media agenda acts as a proxy for the state's authority. In Lebanon, this authority is fractured. When the "Truth" of a national catastrophe like the economic collapse is determined by which channel a viewer selects, the objective economic conditions become secondary to the **Partisan Frame**.

This validates the core hypothesis: the political and religious backgrounds of the channels act as **Interpretive Walls**. Viewers are not just receiving news; they are receiving a "Moral Geography" that identifies their political allies as victims and their opponents as the sole architects of the collapse.

5.6. ANALYSIS OF THE REALITY-FILTER CORRELATION

The strength of these interpretive silos is best illustrated by the correlation between media framing and the audience's mental mapping of the crisis.

Table 2

Table 2 Correlation Between Media Framing and Causal Attribution (Spearman's ρ)				
Hypothesis	Correlation Pair	ρ Value	Significance	Result
H1	Partisan Media Selection \times Causal Attribution	0.67	0.000	Accepted
H2	Framing Exposure \times Interpretive Polarization	0.70	0.000	Accepted

- **Analysis of H2 ($\rho=0.70$):** The extremely strong correlation in H2 is the most critical landmark of the study. It indicates that the talk show is the primary "**Reality-Filter**" for Lebanese youth. A value of 0.70.

suggests that as exposure to a specific channel's framing increases, the individual's "Interpretive Polarization" deepens proportionally.

The Cognitive Lens: According to **Kim (2020, p. 15)**, when a social system fails, the media becomes the "Meaning-Maker" This is not a neutral meaning in Lebanon. The talk show version chooses what facts are to be emphasized and what are to be suppressed, and actually constitutes a partisan version of reality that the viewer incorporates to alleviate the anxiety of the crisis.

5.7. END OF THE EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The case study confirms that media addiction in Lebanon is a Reinforcement Mechanism to social divisions. The use of a partisan Shield to protect against the uncertainty of state failure are the actions which have made sure that the people in Lebanon have been kept cognitively divided by MTV, Al-Jadeed, and Al-Manar. Although the young generation continues to experience the same economic status, they exist in Parallel Realities, and it would be next to impossible to build a cross-partisan approach on a national scale using the present media environment (Hamdi, 2023, p. 413).

6. DISCUSSION INTERPRETIVE WALLS AND THE DEATH OF A UNIFIED AGENDA

Findings of this exploration imply Lebanon is in the midst of a sociopolitical failure that has been dubbed as "Shared Crisis but Fragmented Meaning. However, although the systemic collapse of the state is a universal objective experience, partisan media outlets have commodified and segregated that collapse successfully into the subjective interpretation of the failure.

6.1. THE DEATH OF THE UNIFIED PUBLIC AGENDA

According to classic **Agenda-Setting Theory**, the media's primary social function is to facilitate a consensus on what issues are important, thereby creating a unified public sphere. However, the Lebanese data reveals a critical failure of this mechanism. While nearly 100% of the youth sample agree that "The Economy" is the #1 national priority, they hold **mutually exclusive causal attributions** for it (**Hamade, 2019, p. 213**).

This discrepancy means that while the topic is shared, the "Truth" is not. Because MTV viewers see the crisis as a domestic administrative failure, while Al-Manar viewers see it as a geopolitical siege, they are cognitively incapable of agreeing on a solution. This prevents the formation of a **Unified Public Agenda**, ensuring that any attempt at cross-partisan political mobilization is paralyzed by the same "Interpretive Walls" that the talk shows reinforce. The media, therefore, does not just reflect existing divisions; it acts as an **engine of partitioning** that makes national civic unity statistically impossible (**Sakhawi, 2021, p. 163**).

6.2. THE PARTISAN SHIELD: ANXIETY VS. IDENTITY

The investigation highlights that 52% of the respondents are politically affiliated, a factor that fundamentally alters the "Dependency" relationship. For these youth, the partisan talk show functions as a **Partisan Shield**. In a failing state, "Ambiguity" is a source of psychological trauma; individuals feel overwhelmed by a collapse they cannot explain.

Drawing on the work of **Al-Hajj (2020, p. 147)**, the study suggests that partisan media selection is a coping mechanism. The talk show removes the pain of ambiguity by providing an "Identity-Consistent Explanation." By framing the viewer's political camp as the "victim" and the opponent as the "villain," these programs provide **Identity Confirmation** rather than news. This explains the extreme resilience of institutional TV in Lebanon: people do not watch these programs to be informed; they watch to be protected from the cognitive dissonance of state failure (**Kim, 2020, p. 15**).

7. CONCLUSION: PARALLEL STATES, PARALLEL MINDS

The investigation concludes that the Lebanese media system has successfully filled the structural void left by the failed state, but it has done so by creating a **Fragmented Reality**. By utilizing partisan framing to attribute the causes of

the national crisis in diametrically opposed ways, television talk shows ensure that the Lebanese public remains cognitively divided even as they suffer collectively from the same economic conditions.

Lebanon is no longer a single state with a unified public sphere; it is a collection of **Parallel Cognitive States**. In this environment, "Salience" (importance) has been replaced by "Framing" (blame), and the "Truth" of the crisis has become a variable of the viewer's remote control.

7.1. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION: BREAKING THE SILOS

To bridge these fragmented realities and foster a unified civic response, media organizations must transition toward a **Data-Driven Unified Narrative**. The study recommends the implementation of "**Counter-Frame Panels**," where experts from opposing interpretive backgrounds are required to debate using a shared, objective data set provided by independent international or academic bodies.

Without a move toward a **cross-partisan factual consensus**, the Lebanese public will remain trapped in "Echo Chambers" that serve only to maintain the political status quo. The media must stop acting as a "Partisan Filter" and begin functioning as a "National Bridge" if the public is ever to navigate their way out of state failure (**Hamdi, 2023, p. 413; Al-Sakhawi, 2021, p. 163**)

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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