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**Mobilising the Lebanese Diaspora in Times of Political Turmoil at “Home”**

Investigating online engagement practices and the roles of the alternative online medium

*Thawra Chronicles* in the context of the Lebanese Revolution 2019

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***“Don’t hate the media—become the media.”***

A slogan of the *Indymedia* network

## ABSTRACT

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This research focuses on the contemporary case study of the *Thawra Chronicles*, founded by three London-based members of the Lebanese diaspora in the wake of the Lebanese Revolution in early October 2019 to support the social movement from afar, targeting non-Lebanese individuals as well as Lebanese within and beyond its borders. *Thawra Chronicles* is a multifaceted, independent alternative online outlet aiming at commemorating the revolution, by providing information, curating art as well as serving as a space of participation through the upload of user-generated content and pledges. The Lebanese Revolution, an anti-governmental social movement, is deemed unprecedented and historic as it unified “the people”, overcoming sectarian and class fragmentations deeply rooted within Lebanese society and the diaspora. The revolution started on October 17, 2019—and the country is still battling continuously worsening socio-economic conditions. *Thawra Chronicles* has not been updated since May 23rd, 2020, or Day 220.

By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with all founding members and three diasporan users who consumed and contributed to the page, this research investigated diasporic online engagement practices with *the home* in times of political turmoil. The walkthrough method provided in-depth understanding site’s structure and respective goals. This research analysed the outlet as a digital activist endeavour through the context of the possibilities the online sphere holds for contribution to a social movement as well as providing a counter-narrative to “vetted news” by way of awareness activism. Analysed through the framework of diaspora and digital activism, the findings show that the *Thawra Chronicles* posed as a moderate way of activism and diaspora mobility which built on the open opportunity structures in the country of residence.

Further, the outlet has played a crucial role in building a counter-narrative, brokering information and educational resources and furthermore curate emerging art of the revolution. In addition, it served as a safe space for participation. Thus, it allowed diasporans to participate in the revolution from afar, to negotiate the dualities and multilocalities of their diaspora identity. In addition, participation reinforced notions of belonging and produced feelings of empowerment, hope, solidarity and “having contributed”. While the outlet did not offer possibilities for direct answer-

response communication, it works as a memorial-type archive of the contemporary revolution, allowing users to return and re-emerge or participate at a later point in time, thus, countering the ephemeral notions of commercial social media platforms and further serving as an example that maintenance of diaspora identities can be enriching and creative.

Keywords: *digital diaspora, Lebanese diaspora, digital activism, awareness activism, alternative media, Lebanese Revolution 2019*

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This thesis has probably been the most challenging experience in the 27 years of my existence, and it embodies so much more than the mere 21 803 words it counts. I've not only been lucky to have met incredibly inspiring individuals, but I've learned a great deal about resilience, privilege, passion, and compassion. About what home means. About politics, international relations and, yet again, how much power the media can hold.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>I INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>A Paving the Field: A brief Introduction to Lebanon</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>B Introducing the Thawra Chronicles</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>C About the Research</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>II LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>A On Diaspora</b> .....	<b>13</b>
1 Conceptual Definition: From Essentialism to Social Constructivism .....	14
2 Diaspora Formation .....	18
3 Mobilisation, Engagement, and Activism .....	20
<b>B The Digital and the Diaspora</b> .....	<b>24</b>
1 On (Digital) Activism and Alternative Media .....	26
<b>III METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>A Methodological Approach</b> .....	<b>32</b>
1 The Walkthrough Method .....	32
2 Semi-Structured Interviews .....	34
3 Analysis of Data .....	37
4 Reflections on Methods and Research Design .....	38
<b>IV ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>A Between Here and There: Mobilising the Diaspora</b> .....	<b>40</b>
1 The Lebanese Revolution as the Trigger for Mobilisation.....	40
2 Varying Levels of Diaspora Engagement: Emotions, Sense-Making and (Be)longing .....	42
3 Tapping into the Digital Sphere: Mobilising Online.....	45
4 The Thawra Chronicles: Independently Countering the Narrative .....	46
<b>B The Multiple Roles of the Thawra Chronicles</b> .....	<b>50</b>
1 Brokering Information and Trust.....	51
2 Curating Educational Resources.....	53
3 Inviting Participation .....	54
4 Commemorating the Revolution .....	60
<b>V. CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>63</b>

<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Appendix 1 – Walkthrough Method .....</b>	<b>79</b>
Timeline.....	81
Talks .....	82
Diaspora.....	83
Art.....	84
Social Media .....	86
Contribute.....	87
We the Lebanese .....	89
Reflections after Walkthrough .....	92
<b>Appendix 2 – Interviewees .....</b>	<b>93</b>
Finding the Sample.....	93
Interview Sample.....	94
Background Information on Sample .....	94
Interview Request Form Example.....	96
Consent Form .....	97
<b>Appendix 3 – Interview Guides .....</b>	<b>99</b>
Founder Interview Guide.....	99
Contributor Interview Guide .....	100
Expert Interview Guide .....	101
<b>Appendix 4 – Interview Transcript Excerpt .....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Appendix 5 – Coding Process Excerpts .....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Appendix 6 – Themes Excerpt.....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Appendix 7 – Thawra Chronicles User Statistic .....</b>	<b>119</b>

# I INTRODUCTION

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Especially since the so-called “Arab Spring” uprisings cascaded through parts of the Middle East and North Africa a decade ago, alternative online media structures and practices and their relation to social movements have been of great interest to media and communication research endeavours (e.g., Hassanpour, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Newsom & Lengel, 2012). Their impact on and their roles in mobilisation, organisation as well as dissemination of information and knowledge—within and beyond the borders of the respective nation states—have been hotly debated, both celebrated and criticized.

There is one thing most scholars agree upon, though: This phenomenon was enabled by the affordances of communication and information technology in the Internet era, allowing civic actors to disseminate information rapidly, to cultivate and maintain existing and new relationships, and to virtually connect with like-minded individuals to participate in the social movement. Thus, furthering collective action and civic agency by way of the virtual sphere, allowing the challenge of existing power-relations, the facilitation of counter-hegemonic narratives (Atton, 2002; Couldry, 2015) all while transcending boundaries of time and space.

Besides activists, migrant and diaspora communities have been early adopters of digital technologies (e.g., Brinkerhoff, 2009) as it made it significantly easier—especially in terms of costs—to maintain their transnational relationships with friends and kin. Furthermore, to maintain their bond to their country of origin, or establish new connections, to inform or engage with specific causes or events in their country of origin (e.g., Koinova, 2011, 2013) such as the Arab uprisings or the 2019 Lebanese Revolution<sup>1</sup>, also dubbed October Revolution.

Long acknowledged to be strong players in the political economies of home and host land—referring to the country of origin and the country of current residence—diasporans engage and become active participants in homeland-oriented social movements (e.g., Bernal, 2013; Koinova)

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of readability, the 2019 revolution will be referred to as the Lebanese Revolution in the following.

Especially in times of social upheaval and political turmoil, diasporans mobilise and participate from afar. Such mobilisation may be off- or online, or both, with varying different levels of individual and group engagement. From signing petitions, to participating in protest, activism may also take on the form of digital awareness activism or digital participation (e.g., Vegh, 2003). Exercised via non-mainstream alternative sites or social media, diasporans strive to further the collective demand for change while being unable to physically be *there* to participate.

## **A Paving the Field: A brief Introduction to Lebanon**

### *A Country in Crises*

As of October 2019, Lebanon is facing unparalleled anti-government protests (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2019) following a planned taxation of goods such as tobacco, gasoline but also Voice-over-iP (VoIP) services, such as WhatsApp calls (DW.com, 2019). These turned into “unprecedented” social upheaval, overthrowing the government, and fighting against corruption and sectarianism (Chulov, 2020) in a bid to oust the ruling elite that has been in power since the end of the Civil War in 1990. The taxation has been deemed as the proverbial drop that made the barrel overflow, as civic discontent has been simmering for years.

The crises of contemporary Lebanon are of both political and economic nature, described to be one of the “top 3 most severe crises episodes globally” since the mid-19th century (World Bank Group, 2021). The handling of the August 2020 explosion in Beirut, deemed “one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history” (Amos & Rincon, 2020) exacerbated the civic discontent further. As of 2021, more than half the population is assumed to live below the national poverty line (World Bank, 2021) suffering from daily power cuts, lack of medical resources and clean water, and without access to their bank accounts as a result of an “unprecedented economic crisis” (ibid), spearheading a “new exodus” (Ibrahim, 2020) of people leaving the country amidst the on-going COVID pandemic.

Lebanon, considered a chronically weak state (Skulte-Ouaiss & Tabar, 2015) with a long-standing history of conflict<sup>2</sup>, is ruled in the framework of a confessionalist system. This means that it is organised alongside the 18 recognized religious sects with positions proportionally reserved for

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<sup>2</sup> See [Traboulsi](#) (2012) for further information on Modern Lebanese history.

representatives of specific religious communities. In general, the country is considered to be deeply fragmented alongside said sectarian lines, making it hard to govern (ibid; Andrew Arsan, 2020). Another interesting point is the seeming lack of a shared history as Lebanese history books stop in 1943 (Khater, 2016), the year the country became independent, which furthers fragmentation as a plurality of narratives on historic events is available but no consistent way of teaching the country's history (Bahous, Nabhani & Rabo, 2013; Nasser & Abouchedid, 2000). The uprisings are viewed as unique as they seemingly unite different religious sects, regional backgrounds, ages, and social classes overcoming the profound fragmentations (Arab Centre for Research & Policy Studies, 2019), furthermore embodying the formation of a “new political consciousness” producing a new national identity (ibid).

### *The Lebanese Diaspora*

A distinct feature of Lebanon is the fact that a majority of Lebanese, citizens or those subscribing to the Lebanese cultural identity<sup>3</sup>, are living outside of the nation state due to past and current social, economic and political reasons. The diaspora counts between 4 (Verdeil & Dewailly, 2019) and 15.4 million (Pukas, 2018) people—the number varies greatly—in contrast to the approximately 6.8 million individuals (UNFPA, n.d.) remaining in the country. Lebanese citizens in the country are estimated around 4 million, making Lebanon the country with the highest refugee population globally, said to be a roughly One-in-Four ratio (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2021).

While migration has always been seen as a central part of the country's history (Collins, 2005; Tabar, 2010) the recent developments are leading to a new wave of migration of young, highly-skilled and educated individuals seeking safety and prosperity abroad (Yacoubian & Gharizi, 2021) with a migration forecast expecting the inhabitant numbers to drop to 6.2 million by 2030 (United Nations, 2019). The Lebanese diaspora tends to be highly educated (de Bel-Air, 2017) and is described as “entrepreneurial” and “conflict-induced” (Skulte-Ouaiss & Tabar, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Not all diasporans hold Lebanese citizenship, but the discussion of the acquisition process goes beyond the scope of the thesis, see Lebanese Nationality Law for further information.

### *The Media Landscape of Lebanon*

While the Lebanese media landscape is deemed free in relation to other countries in the region, it possesses high levels of political parallelism and is seen as externally pluralistic (El-Richani, 2016; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) meaning that while there is a broad range of outlets available—a large number owned privately—, they embody strong tendencies of bias in reporting and closeness to political parties. The media watchdog Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF, n.d.) describes the media landscape of Lebanon as “outspoken but also extremely politicized and polarized. Its newspapers, radio stations and TV channels serve as the mouthpieces of political parties or businessmen.” (RSF, n.d.), furthermore describing free speech as “under attack”, ranking the country on #102 out of 180 countries (ibid, n.d.). The Open Society Foundation (Melki *et al.*, 2012) mapped the digital media landscape of Lebanon, and while it describes the Lebanese media landscape as one of the freest in the region, most of the country’s news outlets “support and represent the agenda of a political personality or party” (ibid:6) which translates into the digital realm, too, leaving next to no space for marginalised or independent voices. Additionally, the leading news websites either replicate or belong to those political parties who own the traditional media (Arab Media Outlook, 2010).

## **B Introducing the *Thawra Chronicles***

The site’s mission is to share the Lebanese Revolution with the world by reporting vetted news, relaying a timeline of daily events, aggregating all the art that emerged from it, and offering a forum to exchange thoughts and perspectives. – Anonymous team member in (Ahmad, 2019)

The empirical case posing the core of this research is the independent and freely accessible, multi-faceted alternative media outlet called *Thawra Chronicles*<sup>4</sup> (thawra, الثورة, is the Arabic term for rebellion, revolution, or revolt). Founded by three London-based members of the Lebanese diaspora, shortly after the beginning of the October Revolution, predominantly out of frustration with mass media coverage of the social movement, and in a bid to show solidarity with the demonstrators on the streets of Lebanon. The website aims to “document the resistant Lebanon and its predominant global diaspora” (Thawra Chronicles, 2019) through providing multi-layered content such as contextual background information and news surrounding the situation in Lebanon,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thawra-chronicles.org/>

organised gatherings across the world—from protests to educational talks—creative output and links to a range of Instagram channels which provide further information on corruption facts, the reclaiming of public spaces and political activism. The site is aimed at both Lebanese and non-Lebanese users with the prominent claim of raising awareness about the current situation while simultaneously serving as an open participatory space allowing for contributions in form of user-generated content.

## **C About the Research**

This thesis aims at conducting case study research to contribute context-specific knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Centred around the independent alternative online outlet *Thawra Chronicles*, the online engagement and communication practices of Lebanese diaspora members<sup>5</sup> in times of political turmoil in their country of origin will be investigated. This shall aid the understanding of how diasporas mobilise online and participate in social movements from afar.

Nesting the diasporans in relation to the wider Lebanese community and the online sphere, the case study allows for a closely monitored look into diasporic sense-making processes. It aims at highlighting their identity work and how feelings of (be)longing and solidarity are constructed and connotated with meaning in a transnational, virtual sphere from a point of social constructivism. Following the social constructivist approach, knowledge is not created but constructed through social interaction, situating human development in the social realm. Further, the social dimension is at the core with meaning and value placed on norms, rules, language, and identity (e.g., Barnett, 2016; Burr, 2015). Societies are seen to be in flux, constantly shaped by interaction, construction, and agency.

In addition, this research provides further insights into the roles and potential of alternative media in the greater context of social movements as well as narrative-creation. This includes highlighting the affordances of alternative media as means to create counter-hegemonic narratives as well as

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout the thesis, the term diasporans will be used, referring to the members of the Lebanese diaspora.

allowing minority voices to be heard and speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for or about.

This research adds an angle on a specific, contemporary social movement in the Middle East, which is historic in its unity, seemingly overcoming sectarian fragmentation in a bid to demand change, keeping in mind that the situation in Lebanon continues to worsen. Centring the research around the 2019 Lebanese Revolution does not only add to the study of diaspora engagement in times of political and social upheaval from a point of media and communication studies, but furthermore contributes context-specific knowledge about the Lebanese revolution—a phenomenon not studied in-depth. It builds on previously carried out research on diasporas and politics of identity, politics, and transnational engagement (e.g., Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2009).

#### *Research Questions and Structure*

***What roles did the Thawra Chronicles play in the context of the Lebanese Revolution of 2019?*** poses as the core question of this research endeavour. To answer it sufficiently, a set of sub-questions has been designed:

- *In what ways did diasporans utilize and engage with the Thawra Chronicles to participate in the Lebanese Revolution from afar?*
- *How did the engagement with the Thawra Chronicles create or re-enforce values of community, cohesion, and (be)longing for Lebanese diasporans in times of political turmoil?*

*Chapter 1* will provide a theoretical basis, covering concepts of diaspora as well as diaspora formation and mobility practices. Furthermore, it will outline the needed framework of alternative and activist media with a focus on digital activism and diaspora engagement. Firstly, the literature review will build the theoretical framework based on concepts of diaspora and digital diasporas, their formation as well as their mobilisation practices. Further, it will highlight the affordances of alternative media as means to create “counter-hegemonic” narratives as well as allowing minority

voices to be heard and speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for or about. *Chapter 2* aims at providing insight into the methodological approach and research design. It discusses the process of data collection by employing a qualitative method mix consisting of a walkthrough approach and semi-structured interviews with all three founding members of the *Thawra Chronicles* as well as three contributors and consumers of the site. Furthermore, it includes a reflection on the methodology and its limitations as well as thoughts on carrying out research from a point of “social intrusion”. The analysis in *Chapter 3* concentrates on synthesising the findings that emerged from the empirical data with the theoretical framework. It aims at building connections between the real-life example and previously carried-out research. In *Chapter 4*, the thesis will conclude by concretely answering the research questions and summarizing the key findings. In addition, it includes personal reflections on the overall research endeavour and outlines possible further research.

## II LITERATURE REVIEW

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### A On Diaspora

Diaspora is, perhaps by its very nature, a moving target, both as a social and historical process, and as a concept. It is inherently dispersed, heterogeneous and fragmented, with uncertain contours and incommensurable meanings. – Alexander (2017:1544)

Deriving from Greek language, the term diaspora—descended from *diaspeirein* (*to scatter, to spread about*)—is defined as “the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) describes diasporas as “migrants or descendants of migrants, whose identity and sense of belonging have been shaped by their migration experience and background” (IOM, 2019:49).

## **1 Conceptual Definition: From Essentialism to Social Constructivism**

The field of diaspora studies emerged in the 1960s, then oftentimes concerned with the “Jewish experience” (Ages, 1973; Cohen, 2008) or what Cohen coined as “classic diasporas”. Later, it was systematically extended to include Irish, African, and Armenian diasporas, which were also forced to leave their places of origin. The classic understanding of a diaspora generally referred to the experience of collective trauma and victimisation. Often, the scattering would arise from traumatic events leading to the creation of a historic “experience of victimhood” (Cohen, 2008:1) by a cruel oppressor (ibid:1). Throughout the 1980s, the conceptualisation of diasporas continuously extended beyond the classic definition, creating a more diverse “cluster of diasporas”. In a bid to characterize different “ideal types” (Cohen, 2008:2) of diaspora groups, categories such as victim, imperial, labour, deterritorialized/stateless, and trade, were introduced (Cohen, 2008; Safran, 1991). The Lebanese diaspora is commonly categorised as a trade diaspora. William Safran (1991) prominently argued for an extension of the term, using it as a “metaphoric designation” in order to include varying “historical experiences, collective narratives and differing relationships to homelands and host lands” (1991:34) such as expatriate minority communities. Furthermore, Safran created a set of key features diaspora communities tend to exhibit, while not all are always applicable. These included (ibid):

- (1) the dispersal from an original centre to two or more regions;
- (2) the exhibition of characteristics such as sharing a common heritage;
- (3) a collective memory of the ancestral homeland, considering it the “true, ideal home”;
- (4) the myth of return to the homeland when “conditions are appropriate”;
- (5) high levels of consciousness regarding their roots and origin, which play a key role in their identity formation;
- (6) the upholding of a myth of the homeland, its physical location, history and achievements;
- (7) the continuous relation to the homeland;
- (8) the expression of “ethno communal consciousness and solidarity”;
- (9) the belief that the collective shall be “committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity”.

These features go along the lines of an essentialist view that champions the argument of identity as deriving from primordial experiences of belonging to a certain community—such as family—and depends on “given cultural traditions” (Sökefeld, 2006:266). Where Safran heavily refers to home-oriented features, Cohen argues that the evolution and character of diasporic groups needs to include voluntary scattering. He further points out that the memory of a “great historic injustice” is crucial for group cohesion (Cohen, 2008:6). He suggests that the homeland maintenance or restoration shall also include the creation of such, arguing it would include “cases of an ‘imagined homeland’ that only resembles the original history and geography of the diaspora’s natality in the remotest way” (ibid:6). According to Cohen, the mobilisation of a collective identity not only goes beyond the new settlements and memories of the homeland, but also includes solidarity “with co-ethnic members in other countries”. This underlines the strong bonds of “language, religion, culture and a sense of a common fate” which may be able to produce an intimate connection that formal citizenship lacks (2008:7).

While others highlight the negative connotation revolving around diasporas (e.g., Safran, 1991; Vertovec, 1997), Cohen highlights the positive aspects of maintaining a diasporic identity, pointing out that oftentimes, the tension between ethnic, national, and transnational identities may be creative and enriching (2008:7). Here, he latches on to Neusner who argues for a possible correlation between living too comfortably and the “dry up” of creativity, ultimately arguing for the possibility of a “degree of subterranean anxiety in the diaspora” (Neusner, 1985, as in Cohen, 2008:7) as a driver for the need of achievement. This refers, admittedly crude, to the high numbers of Nobel Prize winners within the Western Jewish diaspora (Cohen, 2008:7). Regarding locality and the globalised world, Cohen acknowledges that a diaspora is capable of commemorating itself “through the mind, through artefacts and popular culture, and through a shared imagination” in cyberspace, which he refers to as a “deterritorialized diaspora” that also incorporates ideas of hybridity, post-colonialism and culture (ibid:7).

Sheffer (1986:3) argues that

Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin—their homelands.

Even though general conceptual definitions of diaspora may differ, they still follow three common features, namely (1) the dispersion, (2) the boundary maintenance by way of group identity and (3) the linkage to the homeland. Cohen (2008) concludes that diasporas, as a social form, include the maintenance of a collective identity, subdivided into national, cultural, or religious. They furthermore embody strong notions of belonging to a homeland—either real or imagined—and oftentimes, also reflect on the troubled relationships with the host land, experienced through exclusion or discrimination. Today, the core notion of diasporas still refers to notions of migration—either forced or voluntary—and pays close attention to the triadic relationship between homeland, host land, and the diasporic or ethnic community (Cohen, 2008).

### *The Constructivist Turn*

The field “exploded” in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Alexander, 2017; Brubaker, 2005) leading to further proliferation of the term, rendering it difficult to distinguish who is and who is not a diaspora. This triggered criticism for its extensive inclusivity of “essentially any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space” (Brubaker 2005:1), as well as the term becoming “promiscuously capacious” (Anthias, 1998; Tölölyan, 1996) and “overused but under-theorized” (Anthias, 1998:557).

Floya Anthias criticises the concept for barely going beyond the paradigms of race or ethnicity by drawing from “notions of primordial bonding and belonging” (Anthias, 1998 in Sökefeld, 2006:267), ultimately discarding intersectional differences and tending to “homogenize population segments” (ibid). Yasemin Soysal (2000:2) critiques the seemingly missing departure from the logic of “fixed places” and a “naturalization of belonging”, meaning that the notion of diaspora still finds its base in the features of the homeland myth and belonging as a natural consequence. This way, she argues, diaspora formations are seemingly inevitable when people leave their country of origin, but critiques that “this theoretical move [...] ignores the historical contingency of the nation-state, identity and community and reifies them as natural” (ibid:3). While it seems like it is universally agreed upon that a core essence of *diaspora* has to do with notions of home and (be)longing, dislocation and being “out of place” (Sökefeld, 2006:265), an important new argument was the deterritorialization of identities as well as their (de)construction in a “flexible

and situational way”, acknowledging the complexity of the concepts and the need for researching the diaspora beyond the concepts of the ethnic umbrella (e.g., Soysal, 2000; Anthias, 1998).

Cultural anthropologist James Clifford (1994) considers *diaspora* a “travelling term” (ibid:302), deemed as a suitable non-normative starting point for discourse. The social constructivist stance moves the term *diaspora* away from the classical connection to a centre/nation-state—or the notions of loss and return, as well as the notion of diasporas as somewhat fixed by default entities with shared values, practices, and identities (Brubaker, 2005; Vertovec, 2005). Instead, it views diasporas as formed and influenced by complex identity-construction practices acknowledging fluidity, hybridity as well as lived experiences and gender. Others argue that diasporans constantly negotiate identities and cultures, expressed in the “‘master metaphor’ of hybridity” (Androutsopoulos, 2006:520; Sinclair & Cunningham, 2000).

Clifford (1997) among others, considers concepts of (dual) consciousness, collectivity and solidarity, derived from communities in flux (in terms of roots and routes)—meaning “people with historic roots and destinies outside the space/time of the host nation” (1997:255). He argues that diaspora communities mediate, living through tensions of “entanglement/separation” (ibid)—living here and remembering there—which leads to a construction of transnational relations that overcome the geographical borders of nation-states, boundaries, and territoriality.

Stuart Hall (1994) investigated cultural identity in connection to diaspora and states that it is a matter of “being” and “becoming”, constantly undergoing transformation as identities are in flux, subject to the “play of history, culture, and power” (1994:225). Further, he defined the diaspora identity as shaped by hybridity, of constantly producing and reproducing through transformation and difference (ibid:235). Where Shafiqur Rahman (2010) states that the term diaspora is critically linked to cultural identity and citizenship, Mohammad Hossain and Aaron Veenstra (2017) add that diasporans live with a “duality” between the struggles of acceptance in a host society, and the strong influence their home culture still retains on them. It consequently means that “the experience of living in a cultural duality or multicultural society is an integral part of the diaspora community” (Hossain & Veenstra 2017:4-5). Dalia Abdelhady (2007) researched the cultural production of the Lebanese diaspora finding that they participate in the creation of a collective

memory of a homeland through negotiating their identities through art, constructing their narratives and identities around notions of memory, nostalgia, and displacement. Martin Baumann (2000) adds that the term *diaspora* is connotated with emotions such as “uprootedness, precariousness and homesickness” (ibid:313), explaining their long-standing cultural or religious loyalties to the country of origin.

In an attempt to combat the diluting of the term, Steve Vertovec (1997) argues for the distinction of its meaning into three categories: diaspora as either a social form, a type of consciousness, or a mode of cultural production. He calls for the inclusion of “both structure (historical conditions) and agency (the meanings held and practices conducted by social actors)” (ibid:24).

## **2 Diaspora Formation**

Diaspora formation, from a social constructivist perspective, has been viewed as an active process of transnational mobilisation (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007; Brubaker, 2005; Sökefeld, 2006) rather than a “natural consequence” (Sökefeld, 2006:265) of migration. Hossain & Veenstra (2017) argue that becoming diasporan goes beyond the mere process of migration. They state that notions of socio-economic, political, and cultural developments as well as the always-progressing communication and media environments leave a heavy influence on the ways human migration affects societies, leaving those who migrate in a “complex situation” (ibid:5). New affordances of media and communication technology have significantly impacted the processes of migration and diaspora formation, as they allow for transnational connectivity, enabling better access to migration-related information, and connection with others in the new country of residence. The definition of diaspora in this thesis will follow Adamson & Demetriou (2007:497) who conceptualise diasporas as:

a social collectivity that exists across state borders and that has succeeded over time to (1) sustain a collective national, cultural or religious identity through a sense of internal cohesion and sustained ties with a real or imagined homeland and (2) display an ability to address the collective interests of members of the social collectivity through a developed internal organisational framework and transnational links

### *Beyond Migration*

Sökefeld (2006) borrows from social movement theory when investigating diaspora formation in the backdrop of transnational spaces. He describes diaspora formation as “a special case of ethnicity” (2006:266), stating they are “imagined transnational communities which unite segments of people that live in territorially separated locations” (ibid:267). Scholars have distinctly separated diasporans from migrants. Though diaspora refers to immigration and migrant peoples, the meaning travels beyond the mere process of migration (Hossain & Veenstra, 2017; Sökefeld, 2006) and formation of a diaspora is to be seen as a process. Sökefeld argues that the emergence of a diaspora is not a “natural consequence” (Sökefeld, 2006:265) of migration but rather a specific mobilisation process. The formation is influenced by the imagination of a transnational community that may be “purely imaginary and symbolic” (ibid:268), and shared identity markers which counters essentialist claims of belonging and roots as the backbone of diasporic communities. He concludes that without the imagination of such a community, exceeding transnational communication, the formation of a diaspora is not possible. He takes central dimensions of social movements into account and suggests that political opportunities enable community formation, mobilising structures and practices, and network formation through which information and initiative for collective action is spread on local, national, or transnational levels, and frames, e.g., the idea of identity as a shared marker for belonging to a larger community or national identity or the framing of a specific country one has left as home (2006: 270-271).

Mobilising structures are “collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective action” (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996:3; Tilly, 1978) They furthermore organise “specific mobilising practices” (Sökefeld, 2006:269) enabling individuals to partake in or become involved in a movement, such as demonstrations or information campaigns. Drawing from social movement theory, Sökefeld argues that prior to the social movement coming into existence, “further contextual and structural conditions are required before grievances can be expressed and transformed into a social movement” (ibid:270), pointing out that three key features of social mobilisation are *political opportunities*, *mobilising structures and practices* and *framing*. Relating this to his research on diasporas, he finds that opportunities such as communication, media and transport means allow for the articulation of identity and community, furthermore stating that “critical events can be considered a necessary condition for the emergence of an

imagination of community” (ibid:275) where “actors are needed to articulate such events” through new forms of action and discourse (ibid). He suggests the definition of diasporas as “imagined transnational communities” in which “the assumption of a shared identity” (ibid:279) uniting people dispersed in the transnational space becomes the core feature defining diasporas. Furthermore, Sökefeld finds that the development of a diaspora is a result of mobilisation responding to critical events rather than a natural and inevitable outcome of migration.

### **3 Mobilisation, Engagement, and Activism**

Adamson (2013) and Sökefeld (2006) analyse the *how* and *why* of mobilisation towards a collective goal while borrowing from social movement theory, to frame the transnational mobilisation by looking at political opportunity structures and other affordances needed to make mobilisation happen. Other scholars view diaspora mobilisation as an inherently political activity performed by “identity based social entrepreneurs” (Koinova, 2016:501) in a transnational setting (ibid; Müller-Funk, 2016) which is oftentimes, but not always, homeland-oriented.

#### *Three Spheres of Engagement*

Van Hear & Cohen (2017:173-175) argue for the diasporic engagement in three spheres: Firstly, the predominantly personal and private household sphere, relating to maintenance of family relations through remittances, phone calls and participation<sup>6</sup> in live events. Secondly, the “known community sphere” which embodies the realm of associational life. Thirdly, the wider imagined community as a more public sphere, which can be strong but “is often ephemeral”, including involvement in political movements, support, and online debates on “social, political, and cultural matters” (ibid:181). They found that intensity of engagement may increase with larger distance to the departed country. Others view diaspora engagement as inherently political, may it be direct or indirect, as “it has an underlying political economy” that is influenced by rudimentary interests and power relations (Betts & Jones, 2016:7) of diasporic actors. This can be understood in a way that their realities and, therefore also their actions, are not happening in a political vacuum and are consequently to be seen in relation.

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<sup>6</sup> Participation is used in a straight-forward manner, namely how users contribute to or participate by utilising a service or a platform (Allen *et al.*, 2014:1141)

With the turn of the 21st century, the involvement of diasporans in relation to conflict and politics of the homeland has been researched from the perspectives of international relations, political sciences, and migration studies, amongst other: To explore the unique nexus of triadic relationships diasporic communities embody in the context of an increasingly interconnected and globalised world. The classic triadic relationship model – homeland, host land, ethnic community – has been challenged to consider mobilities in a variety of other spaces such as the online sphere, cities, or supranational organisations (Koinova, 2018:1258). Through novel communication and information technology advances, the possibilities of staying in touch and engaging with the homeland have significantly increased.

### *Political Engagement with the Homeland*

In his work *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*, Gabriel Sheffer (2003) investigates the political organization of diasporas. He concludes that the two main causes are either the improvement of conditions and ensuring of communal continuity in the host land, in support of the homeland or in relation to other members of the diaspora globally dispersed. In response to crises or conflict, diasporan actors act by deploying specific skills—intellectual, social, or political capital through established networks or individual means, or in cooperation with other groups concerned with humanitarian, legal, development, or political matters (European Union Global Diaspora Facility, 2021).

Especially in relation to conflict and post-conflict settings, the role of diasporas has been seen as controversial: They have been seen as “war mongers” and “peace wreckers” hemming possibilities of reconsolidation and development by posing as a market for rebel groups seeking financial resources for renewed conflict (Collier, 2000:14 in Van Hear & Cohen, 2016). Further, they have been seen as in ambivalence or as “peace agents” aiding with relief and recovery efforts during and after conflict (e.g., Adamson, 2013; Brinkerhoff, 2009, 2011; Koinova, 2011, 2018; Van Hear & Cohen, 2016). It is evident that diasporas are “well-established players in the political economy” (Van Hear & Cohen, 2016:171), increasingly so in the age of globalisation (Brinkerhoff, 2006). Globalisation here is related to the “increasing volume and speed of flows of capital and goods, information and ideas, people and forces that connect actors between countries” (Keohane 2002:194 in Tarrow, 2005:5).

The dominant approach of analysing diasporans as “actors of transnational processes” (Quinsaat, 2016:1016) has led to the emergence of applying social movement frameworks to understand practices of diasporic mobility and engagement in relation to political or social struggles (Sökefeld, 2006; Quinsaat, 2016). Quinsaat (2016) states that diaspora activism occurs “through the interaction and combined influence of the shifting political environment, constellation of actors and organizations, and construction of collective identity” (ibid:1015), much like non-diaspora specific social movements. Moss (2020) defines diaspora activism as “any émigré, exile, refugee, or emigrant advocating for social, economic, and political change in their country of origin” (ibid:1).

### *Ways of Mobilization*

In addition, scholars such as Quinsaat, Adamson, and Koinova have drawn on similarities between mobilization efforts of home-land oriented diaspora activists and social movements in bids to understand how diasporans become engaged in activities and organisations relating to political or social turmoil in the homeland, arguing that prior research has largely focussed on understanding the reasons behind, the why, of mobilization.

In her 2011 study on comparing US-based Lebanese and Albanian diaspora organisations’ engagement with pro-sovereignty and independence efforts, Koinova refers to them as “conflict-generated” diasporas (2011:437) linked to conflict-prone regions—the Balkans and the Middle East—experiencing post-conflict reconstruction under enhanced globalised conditions (ibid) and investigates why and how diasporas become moderate actors. She views diasporas as “identity-based actors linked to a particular homeland” (ibid:443) and defines moderate as the use of a peaceful methods such as “lobbying, petitions, non-violent demonstrations, and Internet and media messages” (ibid:439).

Koinova defines transnational diaspora activism as “a form of contentious collective action, [...] based on the particularistic concerns of actors engaged in identity politics and embedded in ideology, nationalism and sectarianism” (ibid:440) and argues that social mechanisms, including attribution of opportunity and threat, brokerage and emotional responses, play a vital role in the constitution of transnational diaspora mobilization (ibid:441). Furthermore, she underlines the possibilities the US as a Western democratic society provided them with in terms of freedom of

political organisation and speech and argues that while diasporans have not caused the movements, they have “actively shaped” and transnationalised them (ibid:453). Her findings suggest that diasporic actors and circles may be moderate as it relates to the continuous securing of their own livelihood in the host land, and internalised liberal and democratic values. She states that diaspora organisations make moderate claims, acting on the given global liberal political opportunity, which have allowed them to become prominent platforms of sentiments which would be met with repercussions at home. Koinova explains the nature of sustained moderate mobilisation as a two-step process: Firstly, by linking sovereignty and democratisation and furthering this effort to outline threats on the host land’s foreign policy. Secondly, by formulating moderate claims that are responded to by the host land. It could be criticised that moderateness is linked to demonstrating dangers to host land foreign policy by diaspora groups, meaning that the diaspora groups capitalize on outlining dangers to host land policy to sustain their own claims. This begs the question whether this is a core feature of moderateness and agenda-pushing of diaspora groups, or if—and how—moderate mobilisation could happen to equal success without it.

Researching the Lebanese diaspora engagement with the homeland, Skulte-Ouaiss & Tabar (2015) establish the uniqueness of the Lebanese diaspora compared to other diaspora communities. They state that participation in homeland public affairs often replicates the “highly divisive character” (ibid:146) of Lebanese politics abroad. In their study, they investigate how and when the diaspora, individuals and groups located in Australia, Canada, and the US, is able or unable to impact public affairs in Lebanon. Like Koinova (2011), they conclude that while the diaspora is “strong”—that is, numerous, widely spread, relatively wealthy, highly educated, and well-integrated—it is too “weak” to drive significant change on public affairs in the homeland (Skulte-Ouaiss & Tabar, 2015:160). Fakhoury (2018), while sharing the sentiment of diasporic divisions among “Lebanon’s sectarian and geopolitical lines” (ibid:10), argues that the diaspora has contributed through participation and initiation of development projects, charity, and reconstruction efforts. This is furthered by taking into consideration that financial remittances sent from abroad accumulated to approximately \$6.2 billion in 2020, equivalent to 32.2% of Lebanon's GDP that year (Ratha *et al.*, 2021:29). While this is a slight decline in comparison to previous years, Lebanon still ranks in third position among countries most reliant on remittances (ibid).

## **B The Digital and the Diaspora**

Parallel to the developments in diaspora studies, cyberspace emerged and impacted the field significantly, opening it to new research possibilities investigating the impact the Internet and communication technologies had on migration and communication practices. The “new electronic frontier” (Rheingold, 1993) changed the perception of boundaries and identity (Ponzanesi, 2020:981), transcending time, spatiality, and geographic borders. It opened new possibilities for marginalised voices, minority, and migrant communities (Mitra, 2001) as well as transnational connectivity, becoming more and more affordable.

Migrants have long been described as early adopters of technology (Brinkerhoff 2009:12, (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2019:32), as “personal computer and access to the Internet has long become a quotidian resources among migrants [...] to develop, maintain, and re-create transnational social networks” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010:xi). Alonso & Oiarzabal (2010) describe a correlation between migration and technological advances as they facilitate both movement and diaspora formations. In line with the Internet allowing for the study of digital productions of the non-mainstream (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi 2019:32), diasporic groups and their use of information technology have long been a field of academic interest.

While Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek (2017) for example studied asylum migrants’ information sharing through social media, others investigated the role of media in “migration decision-making” (Dekker *et al.*, 2018). Ogunyemi (2015) researched diasporic media production regarding identity-formation between home and host land while Yin (2015) looked at the dissemination of migration relevant information upon arrival in a new host land. Salojärvi, (2017) researched engagement of diasporans with political content when the homeland is facing conflict on the example of Venezuelans in Finland, finding that internal and external factors play a significant role. Brinkerhoff (2009), who was among the first to research the role of diasporas in the context of political influence on the homeland, stated that expression increasingly occurs through activities in support of the homeland and that digital diasporas use the Internet to negotiate their identity, promote solidarity, learn, explore, and enact democratic values.

### *Digital Diaspora and Digital Migrant Connectivity*

The concept of digital diaspora nests diasporans in the online sphere and concerns itself with the appropriation, use and engagement in activities related to communication technology (Laguerre, 2010, 2006) and digital migrant connectivity (Ponzanesi, 2020:37). To establish an operational definition of *digital diaspora*, Laguerre (2010:50) identified three necessary building blocks as social infrastructure that allow the digital diaspora to emerge, namely (1) immigration, as otherwise the group or an individual would not be diasporic<sup>7</sup> (2) information technology connectivity, as it is the “backbone of digitization” (ibid:38) and enables the expression and performance of the digital identity through access and use of telecommunication instruments to seek information and communicate with near and distant contacts, and (3) networking, as it is required to maintain and build new contacts and participate in a virtual community for “political, economic, social, religious, and communicational purposes”. He further argues that the participation is often concerned with either the homeland or the host land, or both. Laguerre conceives the digital diaspora “as the interweaving of the virtual and the real in the hybrid production of everyday life in an immigrant enclave” (2010:51).

“The Internet virtually recreates all those sites which have metaphorically been eroded by living in the diaspora” (Ponzanesi, 2001:396), providing the opportunity to sustain or re-create diasporas as “globally imagined communities” (Alonso & Oiarzabal 2010:9). Furthermore, investigating digital diasporas provides “different scripts [...] for the politics of emotion” (Ponzanesi, 2020:990), necessary to understand the nature and impact of the migrant experience and the negotiation of multiple belongings. Ponzanesi (ibid:978) places focus on digital migrants as “connected users” incorporating the new possibilities to “map the self in relation to increasingly complex patterns of globalization and localization” (ibid). Other terms such as “e-diaspora”, “net-diaspora”, “online diasporas” and “web-diasporas” have been—and still are—in use, though they differ in their take on “which online and offline activities are accounted for” while all being seen as part of the media ecosystem (ibid:979). While all of them are concerning themselves with the complex phenomenon of digital migrant connectivity (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi 2019:35) and the possibilities it

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<sup>7</sup> A sole exception to this rule is the formation of a diaspora by the re-design of national borders as this may result in the situation where people will become citizens of a new national territory without migration.

offers in terms of “spatiality, belonging and self-identification” (Ponzanesi, 2020:977), the term digital diaspora is highly flexible in allowing the integration of multiple levels, namely “Internet-specific, network-oriented and embedded wider social practices” (ibid:979) as well as accountancy for “political, geographical and historical specificities” (ibid).

## **1 On (Digital) Activism and Alternative Media**

In short, activism itself is an inherently political activity as it aims to challenge a given status quo set by those in a position of higher power with the aim to instigate change by *doing something*. Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines activism broadly as “the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a social or political one.” Carried out by individuals or groups collectively, it can be seen as a form of civic engagement and participation addressing issues of public concern. Collective action, that is, oversimplified, a network of individuals grouped together taking action sometimes leading social movements (Pfaff & Valdez, 2010).

Methods and practices of activism are plentiful, and the affordances of communication and technology have allowed activists to branch out to “the online” using alternative forms of expression, communication, and organisation to further their respective agendas. Hund & Benford (2007:445) found that

[i]n the course of engaging in and talking about various micromobilization activities, meanings are produced that facilitate the alignment of personal and collective identities, identity constructions, and convergences that condition future micromobilization efforts.

While participation is dependent on what citizens actively do and which initiatives are taken, it is to be kept in mind that agency is dependent on circumstances such as opportunity structures and accessibility (Dahlgren, 2013:11).

### *Opportunity Structures of Activist and Alternative Media*

Activism media serves as an umbrella term for the study of alternative, radical, citizen, underground, and social movement media, excluding mass media (Clark *et al.*, 2017). Independent websites, blogs or comment lists were early activist media, even though the phenomenon of social movements and nationalism “coincided with the rise of print capitalism” in the 18th century

(ibid:1). Delving under the umbrella, alternative media will be looked at more closely: While a finite definition is debated, the general acknowledgement is that it functions vis-à-vis and in contestation of mass media, carrying notions of “‘grassroots’, ‘independent’, ‘community’, ‘participatory’, ‘self-managed’ [or] ‘autonomous’” (Pajnik & Downing, 2008:7). Atton (2002) and Downing (2001) suggest that the production of small-scale media, generally grass-roots or civic, is frequently—but not exclusively—linked to social movements and “are defined by collective practices of participatory communication within a given group” (Fenton & Barassi, 2011:181). Atton underlines the importance of the “direct voice” (2002:33) in alternative media, referring to members of a particular group which are oftentimes excluded from the mainstream through marginalisation, speaking for themselves, rather than others speaking about them. He illustrates the difference by using the British Big Issue magazine which is, according to Atton, advocacy press rather than alternative press as the vast majority of content is produced by young journalists rather than members of the homeless community. Downing defines radical alternative media, a sub-category more or less, as “alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives.” (2002:2). Clark-Parsons *et al.* (2017) state that while mass social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Weibo, etc. are indeed used by activists and have activist media notions, they remain commercial platforms and are closer to mass media than activist media (ibid).

### *Mobilization on the Internet and Digital Activism*

Like migrant and diaspora groups, activists have been seen as early adopters of information technology, which enabled them to expand their activities into the digital sphere (Lance Bennett, 2003:20). The practice of activism by way of the Internet is referred to as digital, online, cyber or e-activism. Joyce's definition of digital activism includes “both the digital technology [...] used in a given activism campaign and to the economic, social, and political context in which such technology use occurs” (2010:2), including social media platforms as well as devices such as mobile phones and will be employed in this thesis. Sandor Vegh (2003) developed a classification system of digital activism, including the three dimensions of (1) advocacy/awareness, (2) organization/mobilization, and (3) action/reaction. These categories were envisioned to build onto one another, meaning that through raising awareness and doing advocacy work, visibility of a cause will be heightened due to the affordances of the Internet, which in turn may lead into social movements to organise themselves into action.

## *New Sites of Collective Action: Visibility, Awareness, and Solidarity*

The Internet is a site of political struggle and conflict, a contested terrain, supporting marginalised discourses to develop their own deliberative spaces, to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counterdiscourses and subsequently to contest those meanings and practices dominating mainstream public sphere(s). (Dahlberg, 2007:134)

The digital realm and the participatory Web 2.0 have impacted digital media activism practices and social movement formation significantly, providing unprecedented possibilities for those wanting to “challenge the givens of mainstream of popular culture” (Lievrouw, 2011:2). Digital information technologies play a key role in the dissemination of cause-related information and allow for “mass-self-communication” (Castells, 2009:55), exercised through self-generated and -published content (Castells, 2007, 2009) both in real time and asynchronous fashion. They further enable new ways of engagement and the mobilization of vast numbers and specific groups of people, thus, creating “new modes of collective action” (van Laer & van Aelst, 2010:1147), reaching large and dispersed audiences to “bear witness and join in solidarity” (Lance Bennett, 2017:xv), organising and “greatly facilitat[ing] mobilization and participation” (van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010:1146). Simultaneously, participation is made easier through reduced thresholds such as cost-effective connection, the possibility to participate without the need to travel (ibid) and the notion of anonymity.

Further, it enables the networking and connecting to others who share mutual interests or agendas in the context of social and political movements, in a transnational, alternative sphere which is decentralized and difficult to control by elites (Lance Bennett, 2003:29). Digital media activism is considered “low risk” activism (Rotman *et al.*, 2011)—opposing “high risk” activism (McAdam, 1986) such as offline protests. Although this depends on the circumstances as those living in oppressive political systems may be exposed to greater risks while participating in digital activism than those who live in a more liberal society. In their analysis of digital campaigns, Edwards, Howard & Joyce, 2013) found that digital activism has a positive impact on offline mobilization to protest when civil society groups utilise digital tools and “changing government policy is the goal” (ibid:4) and is most successful when governments are targeted. Others (e.g., Baer, 2016; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Şener, 2021) have pointed out that digital activism practices aid in visibility and solidarity manners through connecting individuals who have been through similar

situations, e.g., domestic abuse, experience of racism, or migration, thus, creating a shared sense of “we” and belonging to a larger group.

*“Don’t hate the media—become the media”*

Van Laer & Van Aelst (2010) describe alternative media sites as Internet-based action used by activists to publish and voice alternative views, similar to the open-source movement and “memory-projects” which aim at archiving and systematizing their work and action (2010:1158). A famous example of activist alternative media use was the open publishing network *Indymedia*, founded 1999 and made up of over sixty autonomously operated websites throughout North America, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, linking to each other. It was founded to counter the “information gatekeepers” (Kidd, 2003:48) in a bid to produce alternative narratives and coverage of events, from the perspective of “the growing anti-corporate globalization movement” (ibid:50). New affordances of information and communication technology allow activists to create interest websites, social media or other digital platforms allowing them to communicate their issue and agenda, especially when the mass media may not be very receptive to their messages (Lievrouw, 2011). Furthermore, online outlets enable for bottom-up approaches and means of opposition communication (Howard & Hussain, 2013) to combat closed, censored, or oppressive media environments as studies on the Arab Uprisings have shown (e.g., Eriksson *et al.*, 2013; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lynch, 2014). Digital media activism provides room for empowerment (Lynch, 2014) through making “repressed and isolated” voices heard (Newsom and Lengel, 2012:36) and provides the space for agency-taking while being able to connect on- and offline realities (Howard & Hussain, 2013), encouraging activists to “[N]ot hate the media—become the media”, following the slogan of the *Indymedia* network (Kidd, 2003:49).

As established in the first part of the literature review, diaspora members have the capacity of making movements transnational by default, similarly to the Internet with its capacity of transcending geographical borders. Incorporating new means of technology and communication has led to unprecedented possibilities to control, distribute and disseminate *their* narrative and advance *their* case (e.g., Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013) through alternative forms of media, less restrained by “gate-keeping” mass media outlets—much like social movements. “The Internet allows diasporas to create and to access media that speaks to them as a primary audience,

something they may not be able to do anywhere else and certainly not as cheaply” (Bernal, 2013:168).

In *Diaspora, Digital Media, and Death Counts: Eritreans and the Politics of Memorialisation*, Victoria Bernal (2013) researches the Eritrean diaspora creating an unauthorized online war memorial honouring “martyrs” of the border war. She shows how diasporans utilize the online sphere for activist purposes in the sense of it being an alternative site and a cultural product, bridging the gap between the diaspora and those remaining in the country as well as transcending the nation’s borders. Bernal suggests that nations shall be seen as networks rather than geographical entities and underlines the possibilities of the internet to “decentre the nation from the seat of government [...] foregrounding Eritrean people wherever they are as the essence of the nation” (ibid:255). Furthermore, she highlights its purpose as a space to express grievances, stand in solidarity and honour those who fought, to raise awareness and provide information while simultaneously holding the government accountable by publishing information which were deliberately kept secret. She argues how the Internet is “disruptive of the homeland/diaspora dichotomy” (ibid:260) and offers new ways of expression and understanding citizenship beyond the censorship of the Eritrean government as the memorial was created by US-based activists.

### *Critical Voices*

However, some are more critical of the positive impact of digital online activism and online media in social movements, citing a seeming lack of tangible results stemming from its practice: They view digital participation as a mere substitute for in-person activism favouring weak-tie connections (Gladwell, 2010), or as a performative, “feel good” practice without “impact on real-life political outcomes” (Christensen, 2011:3). Others, citing the digital divide, argue that the virtual sphere is somewhat elitist in local, national and global settings (e.g., Norris, 2001; MacKinnon, 2012; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010) They state that it reinforces existing discriminations (Bernal, 2013), “existing patterns of political participation in society” (Van Laer & Van Elst, 2010:1161) which exclude socially weaker individuals (Tilly, 2004) from social movements and thus, from participating in democratic endeavours. Poell and van Dijck (2015) criticise the ephemeral notions of the online sphere, arguing that while there may be a collective “we”, it is short-lived, failing to sustain long-term participation or accumulation into action.

Countering the argument that the digital sphere is difficult to control, some (Morozov, 2011; Lee, 2018; Tufekci, 2017) have pointed at dangers of mass surveillance, authoritarian repression, and censorship which may turn the democratizing potential of alternative online media into an “authoritarian nightmare” (Lee, 2018:4113).

### III METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

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As this research endeavour investigates human behaviour in a specific context, namely the analysis of diaspora engagement with a contemporary social movement in the country of origin through the means of alternative media, choosing a case study approach was deemed fitting. According to Flyvbjerg (2001), case studies allow to create context-dependent knowledge and are appropriate when the *how* and *why* is at the centre of the investigation. Furthermore, Robert Yin (2014) argues that the case study method—“treasured research classic”—is especially useful when investigating contemporary rather than historical study (ibid:14-17) and Simons (2009:21) states it allows for an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project”.

The case of the *Thawra Chronicles* is thus a fitting case of study as it embodies a contemporary rather than historical phenomenon which has yet to be studied in great depth. Furthermore, it shall aid the construction of context-dependent knowledge in the intersection of diaspora and media studies by investigating the *how* and *why* of diaspora mobilisation, as well as their sense-making and communication practices exercised through their participation in the *Thawra Chronicles*. By way of making direct connections to informants, it is possible to “provide concrete examples and detailed narratives of how power works” (Flyvbjerg, 2001:140) which helps to create the “expert knowledge” necessary to answer the research questions (Patton, 1990:49). In addition, as the human behaviour is at the centre of this research, which, according to Flyvbjerg only produces context-dependent knowledge, it can be assumed that investigation will create knowledge to understand the home-land oriented mobilisation practices of diasporans in relation to social upheaval in their country of origin.

A qualitative method mix will be applied in triangulation (Jick, 1979:602), producing multiple empirical materials which will aid the in-depth understanding of the case and aid in strengthening the validity of results (Jensen, 2013; Jick, 1979). The applied method mix consists of a walkthrough method of the website which shall provide contextual background of the case as well as informing the interviews. The triangulation of methods helped to understand the phenomenon in-depth as both methods were closely interlinked. The walkthrough built the basis for the interviews while the interviews simultaneously ascribed meaning to the results *from* the walkthrough. The one-to-one semi structured interviews allow for the collection of in-depth information (Jensen, 2012:237) as well as lending voice to members of the group under investigation. In this particular case, it is of great importance as the researcher is not part of the in-group, but a “social intruder” (Shah, 2004:549). Hence, the conduction of interviews is a crucial listening exercise in order to avoid biased, preconditioned assumptions.

## **A Methodological Approach**

### **1 The Walkthrough Method**

Investigating the online site *Thawra Chronicles* provides an entry point to the qualitative research endeavour: “walking through”<sup>8</sup> the website, that is observing and consuming its content, helps to gain an understanding of its nature, both as an activist endeavour and an alternative medium. It aids in identifying the different types of content as well as their potential target audiences in addition to ways an audience interacts with the outlet. Furthermore, it falls into the category of web-based content which is prone to “rapid content changes” (Kim & Kuljis, 2010:370) or the potential loss of the entire data set through discontinuation. To avoid this, a digital archive entry of the website was created using the open-source tool *Wayback Machine* to preclude the risk of losing the data throughout the process of the research.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>9</sup> Initially, the website domain was lebaneserevolution2019.com. Prior to the start of this research the website vanished from its original domain without any further information. Through obtaining the original email address and establishing initial contact with the founders, it became apparent that only the domain had changed but it remained unclear how long the new website was going to be online for.

The walkthrough method is often used to analyse web applications or websites with the intention to improve the usability and user experience (Blackmon *et al.*, 2002; Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2018). Here, the method of Light, Burges & Duguray (2018) designed to research apps is borrowed from and tweaked slightly to adapt it to the alternative media context of this study, focussing on the content rather than its technical nature and aiming at observing rather than expressing recommendations of improvement.

Borrowing from content analysis of web-based content, as well as usability methodology, the observation and data collection is unobtrusive, context-sensitive and examines “the artefact of communication itself” (Kim & Kuljis 2010:370) and centres the “communications content” (Riffe *et al.*, 2019:10). Neuendorf’s “Operationalisation”, part of a nine-step content analysis, was used to “define categories and units of measurement” (in Kim & Kuljis 2010:371), asking “What is there?”, “How much of it?” and “When was it uploaded?” to get an idea of the site’s structure and its subsites with its respective content and features.

It shall help identifying different types of content and gather an in-depth understanding of the media outlet and the user’s journey—in order to understand the outlet as an interface to “examine technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences” (Light, Burgess & Duguay 2018:882). The core of this method is a step-by-step observation through engagement with the interface to document “screens, features and flows of activity” (ibid), allowing the researcher to experience the site from a user’s perspective.<sup>10</sup> The walkthrough shall evaluate mediator characteristics embedded in culture as they reference cultural text and practices existing outside of the website, including functions and features, textual content, tone and symbolic representations (ibid:892-93) and collect data which was used to aid the formulation of the interview guides, as well as to provide an empirical set of data for the analysis.

Described as “the new guardians of democracy, a revolutionary form of bottom-up news production, and a new way of constructing self and [the digital] community in late-modern times” (Hookway, 2008:91) alternative media outlets allow for immediate access to information of

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 1 – Walkthrough

individuals “socially, geographically and culturally distant from the researcher” (Webb & Wang, 2013:209). In this case the Lebanese diaspora living across the globe, ultimately providing a public, textual record of events and discourses. The *Thawra Chronicles* can be defined as an alternative online medium or “information hub” (Bar-Ilan, 2005:298) as it is centred around news and political events of the Lebanese Revolution and turned content consumers into content producers creating knowledge (Wei, 2009:533), created in order to cater to the information needs of users while simultaneously allowing participation—all while leaving out personal information about the founders.

## **2 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Jensen describes interviews as “choice instruments for tapping the perspectives of users on media” (2012:270) in the field of media and communication studies. Others view it as a “conversation” (Kvale, 1996:174) aimed at gathering in-depth information and description of a certain topic, subject, or phenomenon, situated in the “life-world of the interviewee” (ibid; Schostak, 2006:54). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their individual interpretations and showcase how they make meaning of certain situations. Thus, the semi-structured interviews have been employed to help understand the sense-making processes of participants as well as providing insight into their realities, identity-formation, and communication processes by letting them “think out loud” (Seale *et al.*, 2004:30) about certain topics.

Trusting and feeling comfortable with an interviewer is crucial in collecting data through semi-structured interviews (ibid). As the participants and their respective engagement and sharing were central to this research and further down, the analysis aiding to connecting the proverbial dots of empirical material and theory, it was of great importance to create a friendly rapport, trust and an environment in which participants felt at ease.

### *Interview Structure*

Two basic interview guides were created to reflect the interest of the study, informed by previous study of the research topic through the observations made by the walkthrough of the *Thawra*

*Chronicles*, and prior contact with the respective individuals<sup>11</sup>. The questions were structured around two main categories: *Personal Background, Diaspora and Relation to Lebanon* and *Involvement with the Thawra Chronicles*. Naturally, the questions of the latter differed slightly between founders and contributors. To avoid short answers and to gather a deeper understanding of interviewees' emotions, thoughts and experiences, questions were structured openly, followed by prompts. Furthermore, as "people don't always say what they mean and mean what they say" (Jensen, 2012:270), emphasis was placed on encouraging interviewees to elaborate when expressions were not clear, specifically taking into consideration that the interviews were conducted in a language native to neither researcher nor participants. Although the interview guides shall provide guidance of the interview (Roulston, 2018), a degree of flexibility was maintained to allow space for follow-up questions as well as participant-led sequencing of questions to capture interviewees' detailed narrations and allow for a conversation dynamic wherein interviewees are relaxed (Brinkmann, 2014; Jensen, 2013).

#### *Pilot*

An initial pilot interview was conducted to examine the adequacy of the interview guides<sup>12</sup> as well as identifying potential problems prior to the main study (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). In addition, the pilot helped test the flow of the interview guides and included questions. Based on the interviewee's response, the guides were revised, and some questions were altered in order to improve comprehension and eliminate redundancy. Since the sample size of the study was rather small<sup>13</sup>, the gathered data was included in the data analysis. All interviews were conducted online through the Zoom application as it allows for geographical flexibility and face-to-face interaction via the video feature as well as screen-recording and immediate download after the interview ended (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, it was chosen as in-person interviews were not feasible due to the nature of the study aiming to include members of the Lebanese diaspora. Participants were based in London, Montreal, Abu Dhabi, and Beirut. The interviews were conducted in English.

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<sup>11</sup> Contact prior to the interview varied in intensity, e.g., one participant sent in-depth information about the Lebanese revolution through a voice message and a 10-minute call was conducted with another participant prior to the main interview as she was unsure about her suitability.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 3 – Founder Interview Guide, Contributor Interview Guide

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 2 – Finding the Sample, Interview Sample, Background Information

### *Sampling*

Reinders (2012) states that in qualitative interview studies, the choice of the included individuals in the study champions the sample size of the conducted study, it is driven by purpose rather than principles of probability (Jensen, 2012).

For this study, the ambition was to include both founders and contributors as they inform the research by contributing two distinct perspectives, which led to a twofold sample: It was of great interest to include founding members as they are “gatekeepers” of knowledge that could otherwise only be assumed, in particular relation to the reasons for establishing the *Thawra Chronicles*, its structure and roles, its target audience as well as engagement rates. Additionally, the contributors provide knowledge on how they have perceived the outlet, as well as their individual interaction practices, and ultimately, how and why they have decided to contribute. Both sets of participants interacted differently and hence provide valuable insights into their media and engagement practices which leads to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The sampling was conducted by reaching out to the website’s email with the aim to find out how many team members there were and aiming to speak to all of them. The sampling of the contributors proved to be a lot more difficult and found its start in analysing and evaluating the 18 contributions found under the *Contribute* tab. It was crucial to identify those who have uploaded content directly related to the 2019 Revolution and to determine whether the uploaded content was self-created. Accessibility plays an important role as contributors must be identifiable, e.g., through full names or indications of their own websites, channels or indicating where they reside in order to find ethical ways of contacting them. This has left a total of six contributors who have been contacted through open public social media channels including LinkedIn<sup>14</sup>, YouTube and Behance, which simultaneously provided further background information. Three contributors have responded and agreed to be part of the study. They have contributed poems and a graphic design font.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 2 – Interview Request

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 1 – Contributions

The interview sample included six people in total, three founding members and three contributors from different age demographics and professional backgrounds<sup>16</sup>. This is particularly interesting as it allowed to capture a considerable amount of variation (Jensen, 2012). Furthermore, a written expert interview was conducted with a London-based, Lebanese Senior Journalist with specialist knowledge on Lebanon and the Lebanese media landscape. It focussed on providing contextual background information regarding media coverage of the revolution within and outside of Lebanon, trust in Lebanese mainstream media and what it means to be a (citizen) journalist in the country which has aided the contextualisation of my findings.

### **3 Analysis of Data**

The analysis consists of the meaning making of collected empirical material by getting emerged in them (Kuckartz, 2014). Each interview was transcribed<sup>17</sup> immediately after the interview concluded as this allowed the fresh memory of tonality and the interviewee's personality to be captured as close to real-time as possible. Additionally, notes were kept in which thought processes and ideas as well as background information shared prior to the beginning of the recording were noted down<sup>18</sup>. As the interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks, the transcripts were printed and closely studied again upon completing the data gathering process. In some cases, sequences of the video material were re-watched to ensure that the tonality and meaning was captured accurately before delving into the analytical process. As interviews become "sources of information through analysis, and of meaning through interpretation" (Jensen, 2012:270), the transcripts were qualitatively coded (Seale *et al.*, 2004; Kuckartz, 2014).

The thematic analysis started with brief deductive coding, inspired by the already established conceptual framework in the literature review, but the predominant approach was inductive aiming at letting the data speak for itself, thus, guiding the analysis (Seale *et al.*, 2004). In practice, each transcript was coded individually and manually, identifying codes and categories through colour-coding<sup>19</sup>. After completion, all emerging codes and categories were either combined or eliminated

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 2 – Interview Sample

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 4

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 4

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 5

in order to establish the key themes of *identity, homeland-oriented engagement, (online) mobilisation, alternative media as a tool*, and subsequent (sub-)categories<sup>20</sup>. The findings provided a concrete entry to the main analysis, in which they were combined with prior findings from the walkthrough method and analysed through the theoretical framework.

During the walkthrough, some descriptive quantitative data such as *how many contributions* or *how many subsites* was collected as well as information as to how the site as a whole is structured, highlighting the nature of the content, texts and features as well as gathering an in-depth understanding on the aim of the online medium as well as its potential target audience and engagement practices with the site, embodied in contributions or pledges. Each subsite of the medium has been systematically analysed in order to understand its particular goal and how this was communicated via its features and structure. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to deeply understand the “flows” (Light, Burgess & Duguay 2016:882) from a user perspective which in turn informed about potential practices such as information gathering, educational resources or participatory features, and embedded cultural references. In connection with the interviews, those preliminary analytical observations could be critically linked to the empirical interview data which aided in the meaning making process while simultaneously validating claims made from the walkthrough against the interviewees’ experiences. This was particularly important to understand their communication and media practice while being sensitive to bias and assumptions.

#### **4 Reflections on Methods and Research Design**

Reflecting on the chosen methodology approach, several notable points became apparent. Starting with Zoom as a tool: While it has allowed flexible, cost-effective cross-border communication with great participation across five time zones, it is necessary to point out that the “truth question” prevails, especially in terms of “small story” narration (Freeman, 2011:116) where people share narratives and recollections of specific incidents or experiences emerging in conversation with others, in “particular situations to particular listeners for particular reasons” (Randall & Phoenix, 2009:123; also Jensen, 2013). While it is always important to listen carefully and to pay close

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix 6

attention to teasing out explicit meanings and implications of interviewees' responses, it was of particular importance here, as English is not the native language of neither the interviewees nor the researcher. Initially worried about creating a safe interview environment where participants would trust me enough with their opinions and insights, I was positively surprised that they shared deeply personal experiences, fears, and vulnerabilities with me.

### *Bias and Cross-Cultural Endeavour*

What Saeeda Shah terms a “social intruder” (2004:549) describes research conducted across socio-cultural borders when “interactants do not share sociocultural experiences *because* of a certain variant” (ibid). In this case members of the Lebanese diaspora, and me—a non-Lebanese person without any ties to Lebanon, experience living in Lebanese culture or in-depth familiarity of social practices, politics, or history. Whereas the world is globalized and inevitably socially and culturally intertwined, greater awareness of differences is present (ibid). Hence, I found it inevitable to familiarize myself with concepts revolving around subconscious bias and furthermore aiming to be culturally aware and sensitive throughout the interview as well as the analytical process. Hereby, I do not mean to “other” the interviewees as being members of the Lebanese diaspora, but rather to decrease the potential of pitfalls through insensitivity or unawareness. This, in turn, could have led to lack of trust, thus directly affecting the empirical material and the following analysis.

### *Expert Knowledge*

As qualitative studies, and cross-cultural ones in particular, are highly context-dependent, it was a logical step to include an expert interview to gather in-depth knowledge on the Lebanese media landscape. I was able to recruit a British-born Lebanese senior journalist with specialist knowledge of the Middle East and Lebanon. Through a written interview<sup>21</sup>, he provided contextual background information regarding media coverage of the revolution within and outside of Lebanon, trust in Lebanese mainstream media and what it means to be a (citizen) journalist in the country which has aided the contextualisation of my findings.

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 3 – Expert Interview Guide

### *Ethical Concerns*

In regard to ethical concerns, all participants have signed consent forms<sup>22</sup> prior to the interviews and time was dedicated to explain the form as well as leave room to answer remaining questions prior to the interview. It was clarified that all collected data is stored safely and will be deleted after the completion of the thesis. Additionally, the Zoom application deletes data of recorded meetings from its cloud 30 days after the recording (Zoom, 2021).

## **IV ANALYSIS**

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### **A Between Here and There: Mobilising the Diaspora**

#### **1 The Lebanese Revolution as the Trigger for Mobilisation**

As Sökefeld (2016) states, the formation of a diaspora is not only a “specific case of ethnicity” but a process which may happen years after people have migrated. In the case of the interviewees, it can be said that they have exposed diasporic traits prior to the start of the social movement, as they all share the experience of migration—most have migrated to seize educational or work-related opportunities, one person cited their sexuality as a cause—while preserving strong ties to the country of origin, Lebanon, through various practices of engagement facilitated through offline and online practices. They have expressed strongly that Lebanon is what they consider home, the place where they collected “some of the best memories” (Founder 3) of their lives and where their kin and friends remain. Furthermore, they extensively spoke about the desire to return, to build enterprises and to raise potential families—but just that the time is “not right” because of rampant corruption and the unfolding crises. Most of them specifically stated they felt like they *had to leave*, mainly due to lack of opportunities which can, in turn, be connected back to the dire socio-economic situation and the political structures of the country. One person stated they moved back in 2015 and left again a few years later as “nothing had changed”.

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 2 – Consent Form

Most of them also participated in offline activities related to relationship maintenance towards the home, e.g., participating and organising protests to show solidarity with those back in Lebanon or engaging in Lebanese community groups in Montreal and London before the revolution. This shows clearly that they subscribe to the transnational community of diasporans “dispersed to two or more countries” and furthermore the “collective identity” surrounding the ethnic myth of shared origin and culture, as well as through stating they identify as predominantly Lebanese even though all of them hold dual citizenship, often (four out of six) from a third country and not the country of current residence. It highlights the notions of multilocality and the practical nature of living in the diaspora through reinforcing the entanglement-separation dichotomy of being here and there simultaneously. Nonetheless, through the data collection process, it became evident that the start of the revolution and the worsening socio-economic situation in Lebanon have impacted their lives significantly and triggered a response in each individual. It invited further self-reflective practices and sense-making processes relating to them being outside of the country they consider home, while the historically unprecedented movement gained traction.

You spend a lot of time on social media during these times, you're like, oh, what's happening? Where are they now? What is happening?? – Founder 1

They shared that the situation has left them with a mixture of emotions, such as the hope that “things are finally moving” (Founder 2), but, simultaneously, also feelings of hopelessness, sadness and powerlessness connected to being away. The eruption of the social movement in combination with the strong emotional response can be seen as the trigger to mobilise and become active in a bid to participate from afar according to their individual means. This goes in line with Sheffer's (2003) findings, namely that mobility and political engagement of a diaspora is closely connected to the desire to change the current status quo, either in the host or the homeland.

Before the revolution, I was abroad living my life. I didn't really do anything Lebanon related. I am actually surprised at myself. – Founder 3

Quinsaas stated that diaspora activism occurs when political environments shift “through interaction and combined influence”. The Lebanese revolution embodies this shift and further poses as a critical event that triggered the mobilisation. In the case of the founders, the unfolding

situation triggered them to become activists. At first, directly involved in offline communities organising and participating in demonstrations, but also by even furthering their activist endeavours in the virtual sphere, by creating the *Thawra Chronicles* in a bid to play an active role in furthering the demands for change, portraying the revolution according to their agenda and allowing others to share their grievances. This showcases their stark connectedness to Lebanon as well as the desire to change the current status quo.

But also, in the case of the contributors, showing their feelings of (be)longing to the larger Lebanese community and making sense of their life in the diaspora. Their emotional responses played a vital role in their mobilisation practice and can be connected to the nexus of tension between their ethnic, national, and transnational identity. While it is apparent that neither of both groups have been driving factors in causing the movement—due to their situation—it is evident that they have taken part in actively shaping it (Koinova, 2011). Furthermore, based on their statements and their engagement, it can be argued that their identity maintenance had a creative and enriching outcome which, in turn, shows their need to articulate the events.

## **2 Varying Levels of Diaspora Engagement: Emotions, Sense-Making and (Be)longing**

It is crucial not to see a diasporic group as a homogenous entity (Koinova, 2011), therefore, it is crucial to highlight the varying levels of engagement displayed within the interviewed group of people. In terms of their engagement with the broader social movement and more specifically the *Thawra Chronicles*, they can be divided into the groups of founders and contributors. The empirical data gathered from the semi-structured interviews provides a rich set of information allowing for a closer, two-fold look, at online mobility practices and individual motivations for such within the diasporic group: Firstly, through the founders and creators of the *Thawra Chronicles*. Secondly, through the contributors.

## *The Founders*

We were so keen on doing something to help because we felt so powerless. You know, we had our family and friends back home, just marching in the Martyrs' Square and protesting—and I was standing in my London flat, enjoying the weather. I was like, this is not ideal. – Founder 1

To be honest, I wish I didn't have to be an activist. This would mean that everything was fine and the country was running well, but I feel like we cannot count on anyone other than ourselves, especially not the government. So, if we don't do anything, the country is going to sink. We cannot *not* be activists today, basically. – Founder 3

Firstly, the creation of the Internet-based outlet in itself can be seen as an activist mobilisation effort of the founders inspired by the larger anti-government protests demanding change in Lebanon—the homeland. The motivations behind the creation are, again, twofold, closely connected to emotion and identity:

- (1) the desire to participate from afar, combatting individual feelings of powerlessness through being away from “the ground” while hearing from friends and family at home as well as seeing events taking place via social media, and the desire to do more than protesting in London.
- (2) the anger and frustration towards mass media coverage not “painting the full picture” (Founder 1) which channelled the desire to participate into the direction of creating the alternative media outlet in a bid to “show what is *actually* happening”. This is tightly connected to feelings of being misrepresented and the movement as a whole not portrayed accurately by commercial news outlets and triggered the strong desire to provide an alternative narrative. Utilizing the means that communication and information technology provide and simultaneously drawing from personal skills such as programming and graphic design, the *Thawra Chronicles* were created, which needs to be seen as a measure of self-representation as they speak from within the community misrepresented as well as as exercised agency of the Lebanese diaspora in terms of negotiating the self and standing up for a cause close to their hearts.

## *The Contributors*

I would say, I felt good, like I am able to give something. I didn't have the means to give money or something, but I was able to give my word. – Contributor 2

For me, it was something really personal. I really wanted to be part of the change even with a simple design, just contributing and showing the world that I, a person [living] outside, did this project dedicated to Lebanon. Just to give something, showing that if we cannot be there, we are here for you. – Contributor 1

The empirical data suggests that the reasons for mobilisation and participation are closely connected to emotions, too, and a staunch desire to be part of the movement “even with a simple design” (Contributor 1, on *Thawra Chronicles*) while being torn about being outside of the country.

Living in Canada and feeling sad that I cannot support the revolution in person, I wrote some poems to motivate my fellow Lebanese citizens. – Contributor 2, text accompanying contribution

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that the *Thawra Chronicles* made them feel like they are able to give something, one contributor pointed out he did not have the financial means but he could still be a part of it through non-materialistic means as he was “able to give my word” (Contributor 2). One interviewee who currently resides in Lebanon, though she has spent “half of her life” (Contributor 3) living in the diaspora all across the globe, decided to participate by contributing a poem. She cited the need to show the world what was going on as well as the desire to educate:

I see myself as someone who talks about unity and how you can be independent, intellectually and in reality. The best service I can provide rather than shout and destroy property is being an instigator of thought, to teach people to actually read on something before they take sides. I want to write something. I want to publish something that will actually make people change, to open their eyes and try to contribute, try to like, look at the concept of citizenship. – Contributor 3

While she has “experience of being diasporan”, it became very clear throughout the data gathering that she was more critical towards the movement and its chances of success than the others. Yet, she stated that while she believed the *Thawra Chronicles* “could have done more”, she decided to contribute because the “idea is bigger than all of us”, referring to the desire for change. The *Thawra*

*Chronicles* provided the structural conditions necessary to become a collective vehicle for online participation, allowing them to showcase the fruit of their “emotional labour” which displays their emotional bond to Lebanon, their solidarity as well as using their art to express their reflections on and about the movement as well as the general situation while being outside of the country—but further, their engagement in collective action.

### **3 Tapping into the Digital Sphere: Mobilising Online**

I felt like the strongest impact I could make was digitally. Because that’s what I know. – Founder 3

Deciding to mobilise online seems to be a logical consequence rooted in the daily routines of individuals in the interconnected, globalized world. As communication, networking and information-seeking practices increasingly occur online, the affordances of the Internet become apparent once again: It allows for the incorporation of such practices into individual timelines (and agendas) from any corner of the globe, at any given time, as limitations of space and time are transcended. Furthermore, the alternative site embodies the capability of diasporas to commemorate themselves “through the mind, through artefacts and popular culture, and through a shared imagination” (Cohen, 2008:7).

Simultaneously, its online-based nature enables the product to attract a larger, dispersed audience who was showcased in the research: Users located in five different countries have been reached—at least. According to the founders, the website gained “a lot of traction” at the beginning of the revolution, which faded after they stopped updating it regularly. In terms of numbers, 10-20 users visit the site each day on average. As of March 21st, 2021, 15,000 users have visited the website<sup>23</sup>. Contributors explained that “it was known” (Contributor 2) as well as being a “trendsetter” (Contributor 3) which they came across through googling or via sent links from acquaintances. As the *Thawra Chronicles* are a freely accessible outlet, the threshold for consumption and participation is considerably low, the seemingly only requirements are the ability to understand English and access to an internet-enabled device.

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix 7

### *Bridging the Gap between the Local and the Global*

In this specific case, the inability to *be there* in Lebanon and therefore participating online symbolizes not only the interwovenness of the multilocality and transnational identities of diasporans, but furthermore showcases that the individuals move to the virtual sphere as they can *be here*. This goes in line with what Clifford referred to as “entanglement/separation”. The virtual allowed the *Thawra Chronicles* to bridge the gap between the local and the global, as it allowed for access from Canada, the United Arab Emirates, and England, feeding the desires of wanting to stay updated on the news but further, to actively contribute to the site by sharing content, going beyond mere consumption practices.

They can thus be perceived as members of the digital diaspora (see Laguerre, 2010; Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2019; Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010) as they are actively using the affordances of information technology to maintain existing relationships with other diasporans and connections at home as well as accessing, participating, or establishing networks in the virtual realm for social, political or communicational purposes concerning the homeland (Laguerre, 2010), made possible through the affordances of IT. This double-positions the research in the transnational sphere, via diasporans as inherently transnational actors, and via the digital sphere, in itself transnational, utilized by them. Nonetheless, it is arguable that using the Internet to inform oneself about news relating to the homeland or connecting to contacts could be seen as a part of a mundane daily routine of a modern diasporan, without the need to explicitly subcategorizing them into specifically digital categories.

#### **4 The *Thawra Chronicles*: Independently Countering the Narrative**

A lot of news and newscasters were portraying maybe... a quarter of the full picture. It just made me really angry. Many of my international friends were saying “We don't understand what's happening, you post some pictures and Instagram Stories [that] are very different from what we read in the news. What is happening?” So, I was like, “F\*\*\* that, let me come up with a blog or something to share what is *actually* happening.” – Founder 1

Following the definition of Atton and Downing, the *Thawra Chronicles* can best be described as alternative activist online media as it was created to “combat vetted news” (Thawra Chronicles, 2021), thus intrinsically motivated to show an alternative narrative vis-à-vis the mass mainstream coverage of the Lebanese revolution. This embodies notions of a minority group feeling

misrepresented and highly dissatisfied, exercising their agency by aiming at reclaiming the narrative—or at least providing a counter-narrative—that was spun around an event in a country that they deeply care for. Furthermore, it is truly independent: On the one hand, from a “technical aspect” as it is not hosted on common social media platforms belonging to corporate actors (Clark-Parsons et. al, 2017), on the other hand as it has no ties to governmental, elite, party, or commercial actors and is entirely self-financed by the founders with no intention of monetization (Founder Interviews). In addition, this highlights how the *Thawra Chronicles* possess possibilities of challenging the existing power relations in terms of media sovereignty and carries on the Lebanese revolution through raising awareness about it, reaching individuals all across the globe. The outlet is generally to be seen as a moderate (Koinova, 2011), low-risk form of activism and participation, rather than a radical mobilisation effort.

#### *News from Home and Sceptis of the Lebanese Media Landscape*

Especially in times when the homeland is in crisis, the news becomes increasingly important to those who live abroad due to their sustained “collective national, cultural or religious identity” (Anderson, 2013). Further, because situations can rapidly change and move in times of political upheaval such as a revolutionary movement spanning across the whole country. In this case the movement was deemed the largest and unprecedented one in recent Lebanese times which possibly strengthens the urge to keep informed but also the worry about their remaining family and friends.

We don't watch the [Lebanese] news to get information, we watch the news to see what our community leaders are doing. – Contributor 3

Referring to the quotes above, it also became apparent that the interviewees are somewhat sceptical towards Lebanese news coverage. This was heavily emphasised in the empirical material in which they referred to the media landscape as “not really free”, voicing that they are not content with—or fully relying—on Lebanese mainstream mass media. Instead, they shared that they use multiple national and international channels and social media to keep themselves informed.

For news, I follow TV channels and their websites, like MTV Lebanon for example. I'm also googling and searching for stuff about Lebanon, on what's going on there. Also, Facebook and Instagram and all those social networks. I watch Arabic and English news. And every morning, I call my mom to check on her but also to check how everything is going in Lebanon.

– Contributor 2

Here, Salojärvi's study on the Venezuelan diaspora comes to mind, stating that it may become more difficult to access information as the media landscape turns increasingly more politicized and outlets may serve as mouthpieces of those in power. This leads diasporans to seek other alternatives of information gathering, e.g., through social media as well as through personal contacts, in a bid to construct and understand "what is really going on" by consuming multiple sources and "fact-checking" with those left behind. While this is not an attempt to provide a comparative study of the *Thawra Chronicles* vis-à-vis the Lebanese media scene or comparing the Lebanese and Venezuelan cases for that matter, similarities become apparent: The highly politicized nature and "mouthpiece" character of the Lebanese media scene, albeit externally pluralistic (Expert Interview; El-Richani, 2013), leads diasporans to retain other sources of information, especially in times of social upheaval.

Thus, even though the *Thawra Chronicles* seeks out to combat vetted news from predominantly Western outlets, it can also be seen as a source of alternative information vis-à-vis the Lebanese media scene. This point can be made as they not only aim at providing unbiased news, but furthermore—through the artworks such as posters and banners, graffiti, and imagery of reclaimed public spaces—enable the users to get a small insight into the revolutionary proceedings within Lebanon.

### *Acting on Opportunity*

The opportunities coming with affordances of communication and information technology permitted the creation of the outlet outside of the corporate structures of mainstream mass media in a transnational setting. Additionally, the ability to employ financial and technical resources, paired with professional skill (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2021), allowed the founders and contributors to become active participants. Further, the opportunity to create and interact with the *Thawra Chronicles* can be traced back to the countries of residence. By this, the opportunity structure can be seen in relation to high levels of freedom of speech and

expression with little worry for repercussions within their respective countries of residence as well as the technological infrastructure, e.g., high levels of Internet penetration which made it possible to access and maintain the site.

This is especially interesting after learning from the interviewees that they have reflected on possibilities of Lebanon-sided repercussions for their actions. The founders for example stated they had concerns about being traced back to the outlet with their names, especially after getting hacked which left them “really worried”. Their kin, remaining in Lebanon, urged them to remain anonymous as well as careful with their news coverage as to avoid possible issues upon return to because “some high-ranking people might not be happy about this” (Founder 3), implying that those people may be part of or connected to the ruling elite. This can be seen as similar to Bernal’s Eritrean case, where the diasporans were located in the US, allowing them to act and create the online memorial, which may have not been possible if situated in the home country.

This notion is furthered by the contributors: One stated that most of his writing is political and related to Lebanon. When asked if he was ever worried about repercussions he said:

Sometimes. And I guess if I was in Lebanon, it would be harder to write what I write from here. But the fact that I have [dual] citizenship makes it less risky to travel [back] because I have another government to support me. – Contributor 2

He further elaborated that he always takes into consideration that his family is still remaining in Lebanon and would not want to jeopardize their security. Another contributor seconded the notion of diasporans being able to “speak their mind” (Contributor 3) due to them being located in countries with “higher levels of freedom” (ibid), while simultaneously being careful of what they voice as they have family remaining in the country of origin. This highlights that diasporans are aware of potential risks connected with homeland-oriented political activity, and yet, still act upon their given and accessible opportunities, especially through the digital means of communication. The *Thawra Chronicles* have the characteristics of a moderate diaspora outlet, serving what Koinova (2011) describes as their major function, namely a space where individuals share sentiments that may not be positively welcomed at home.

## B The Multiple Roles of the *Thawra Chronicles*

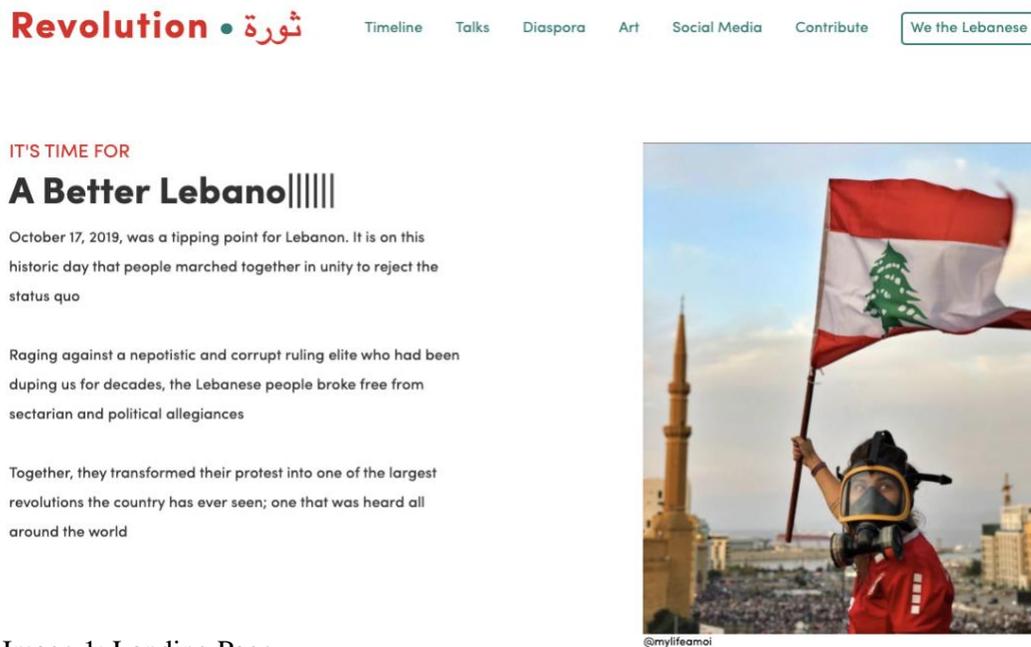


Image 1: Landing Page

Having outlined the driving factors behind the creation and the participation with the alternative media site, the next step is to dissect the multifaceted roles the *Thawra Chronicles* has played. This site, following the colour of Lebanon—red, white, and green—in itself is multifaceted, too, structured and divided into landing page (see Image 1) and seven sub-sites, namely *Timeline*, *Talks*, *Diaspora*, *Art*, *Social Media*, *Contribute*, and *We the Lebanese*<sup>24</sup>, catering to different purposes which will be discussed in the following.

Maybe this can be more, we could get all the great art that’s been happening. The art is just fantastic and the stories and the poems and the songs. – Founder 1

When asked about the target audience, the response given was “everybody, really” (Founder 1), explaining that the main goal was to raise awareness about the current situation both for non-Lebanese as well as Lebanese abroad and at home who “maybe could get more involved” (Founder 2). This posits the *Thawra Chronicles* in Vegh’s category of Awareness/Advocacy activism, as its primary goal was to aggregate and share information and furthering the demands for change

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix – Walkthrough

through advocacy and awareness practices, rather than actively facilitating interpersonal exchange or organising events, demonstrations, or fundraisers. It can thus be seen as a digital activist media outlet and an online-based contribution to the larger, transnational movement of the Lebanese Revolution.

## 1 Brokering Information and Trust

From the first interaction with the website, it became apparent that the *Timeline* serves as the core of the medium as it was seemingly the most extensive part of the site (see Image 2). The information gathered through the interviews could confirm this. Further, it showed that the set goals of informing Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike was met as it provided in-depth information to both the contributors but also to the founders’ colleagues and friends who have feedbacked their gratefulness to them, stating that it helped them to understand the situation more clearly (Contributor 2).



Image 2: Timeline

Thus, *Information Broker* is a fitting label, precisely because it acknowledges the active work that went into the aggregation, the fact-checking and uploading of the content, the delivery of “service” that is breaking down the news into easily digestible and highly informative bits of information, and the location of the diasporans as “in between” other news outlets and the reader. At the beginning it was updated daily, later on a weekly basis, and accumulated to 220 entries covering the 220 first days of the revolution subdivided into *Weeks* and consequently seven sub-entries for each day of the week (see Image 2). The founders later partnered with journalism professionals to fill the news repository (Founder 1). This role of the Information Broker can be seen as the “first” role of the *Thawra Chronicles* as it traces back to the initial motivation for its very creation, the creation of a counter-narrative. The news repository poses the core feature of the site and laid the groundwork for the extension into other “core-areas” which are related to awareness raising and participation. Furthermore, it embodies the start of the alternative outlet underlining the activist

endeavour of conducting research, aggregating information, and publishing in a self-directed manner. Juxtaposed to both mass mainstream media and the polarized Lebanese media landscape, it is exemplary for alternative media as a means of self-representation and giving voice to those oftentimes overlooked—or misrepresented—in the mainstream discourse (Atton, 2002; Lievrouw, 2011).

The interviewed contributors stated they had first and foremost come to *Thawra Chronicles* to read the news—alongside other global and Lebanese news outlets and social media channels—because of the comprehensiveness and ease of consumption. An additional aspect here is trust. One contributor further cited that they believe “the activists are the true people”, who are not bound by commercial interests and share news without the need for practices such as click-bait and over-sensationalisation. This follows the rationale that levels of trust in media are oftentimes closely related to *who* is speaking and with what intention. Simultaneously, it is crucial to take into consideration why and with which individual attitudes a certain media product is consumed.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Here, the [study](#) of Melki & Kozman (2020) on selective news exposure, consumption and sharing tendencies throughout the 2019 Lebanese protests provides interesting insights.

## 2 Curating Educational Resources

Closely related to the brokerage and dissemination of information through the news, is the role of the curator of educational resources. It differs from the active brokerage in the sense that the founders of the *Thawra Chronicles* did not actively create those resources themselves, but rather passively embedded them on their platform, curating a “toolbox” for users interested in learning more. The first time the educational nature became apparent in the walkthrough was on the landing page. It poses as the entry point to the *Thawra Chronicles* and is structured in a way that one must scroll down to access all of the page (see Images 3 and 4). As a user, it felt like a smooth storytelling-like welcome to both the page and the revolution, as it broke down the *what, when, where, who* and *how* of the revolution by introducing the *Pillars*, hinting at the movements unity, the corruption in numbers and a brief *About Us* section. All are followed by a prompt to “Learn More”, showing the user directly that there is further information available. Altogether, it’s easy to navigate and peppered with imagery, prominently showing the Lebanese flag in various images which became one of the main symbols of the revolution.

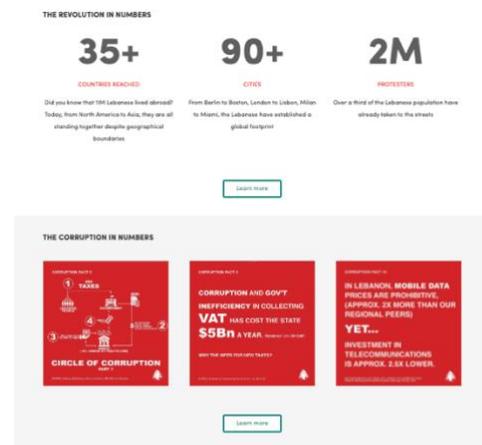
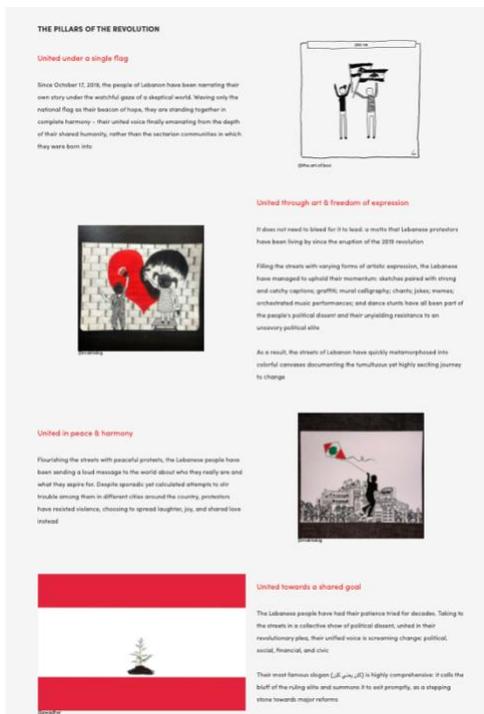


Image 3 left : Pillars of the Revolution

Image 4: Revolution in Numbers, Corruption in Numbers, About Us

Besides the landing page, notion of a “toolbox” specifically refers to the embedding of social media channels under the *Social Media* tab which in itself is divided into six different subcategories—*News, Activism, Illustrations, Photography, Resources* and *Other* (see Image 5)—which hold a total of 36 resources in Arabic, English, and French and link to journalistic outlets, civil society organisations and NGOs, but also to private individuals such as historians, comedians or activists. as well as on the landing page and the *Talks* where users find an aggregation of 24 resources providing context-relevant information, leading them to other outlets who cover specific areas in more depth. The *Talks* feature categories to filter the content through, such as psychology, politics and law, but also education and activism and further, the possibility to choose from organisations and listed speakers (see Image 6). Nonetheless, active measures of researching, choosing, and embedding have been taken to make sure the other resources are in line with their agenda. The *Thawra Chronicles*, by way of providing space for those resources, effectively provide additional exposure for the embedded channels which further the dissemination of information. This can be seen as coherent with their agenda to raise awareness, disseminating cause-related information, cleverly executed by aggregating sources of information already out there into a bigger outlet, connecting nodes of information into a bigger bundle thus raising visibility of the cause.

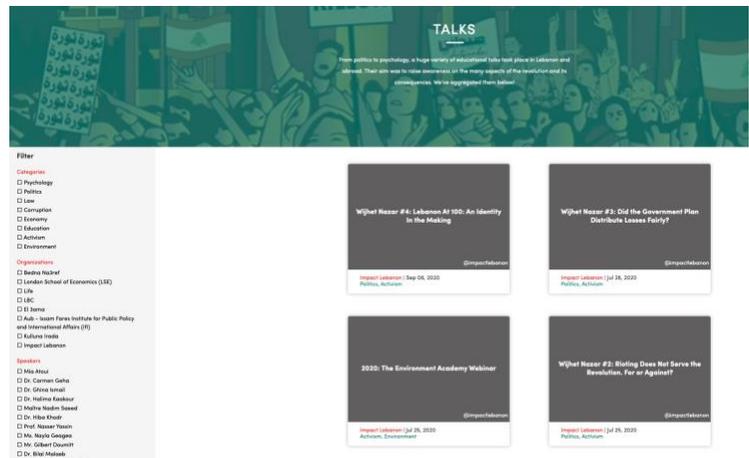
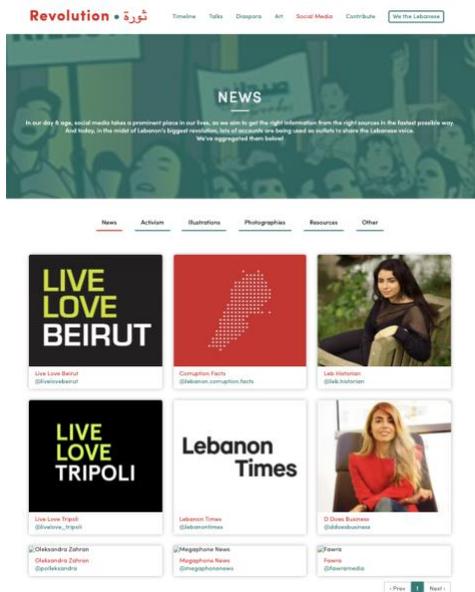


Image 5 (left): Social Media Resources  
Image 6: Talks

### 3 Inviting Participation

People were able to express themselves freely and say stuff they might not have wanted to share publicly. They could be anonymous. So that's a plus, I think. Especially in Lebanon, the liberty of expression is not really a thing. – Founder 2

Another layer of the site is embodied in the subsites inviting participation, such as the *Contributions*<sup>26</sup>, which serves as a curated virtual art gallery including songs, videos, open letters, poems, or a graphic font (see Image 5). Here, some decided to publish under a pseudonym, like one of the contributors, or provide links to other platforms such as YouTube or Behance. The *We the Lebanese*<sup>27</sup> subsite hosts the *Bill of Rights* (see Image 6) explaining 12 demands of the revolution under the title of “We the Lebanese Demand” and the *Pledges*, providing a space for active participation. At the time of writing, 58 pledges were submitted, either anonymously or with a name (see Image 9). These features make the *Thawra Chronicles* a vehicle for those with the desire to express their opinions and feelings through various texts, may they be located within or outside of Lebanon. The possibility to remain anonymous creates a safe space for critical stances, too. When asked about censorship methods, the founders stated that the pledges were published in real-time whereas the contributions were uploaded manually. They did not apply any censorship, except when the content uploaded was “offensive or politically affiliated” (Founder 2).

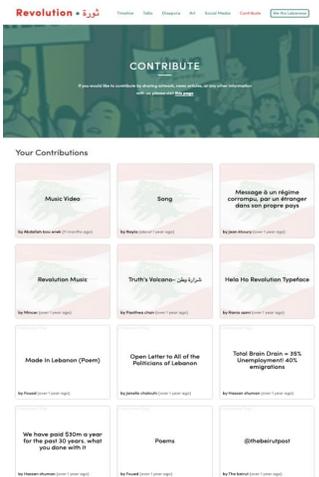


Image 7 (left):



Image 8 (middle): Bill of Rights

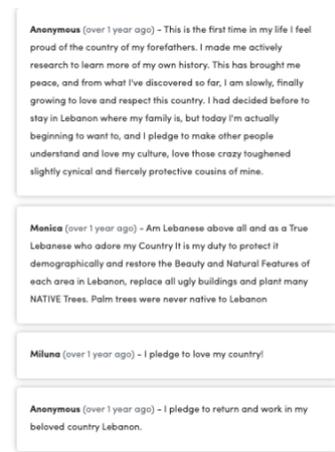


Image 9: Pledges

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix 1 – Contribute

<sup>27</sup> See Appendix 1 – We the Lebanese, including excerpts of pledges and the *Bill of Rights*

### *Empowerment, Sense-Making and Identity-Negotiation*

Through cultural production and artistic expression, diasporans make sense of their situation (see Abdelhady, 2007; Hall, 1994; Vertovec, 1997). Thus, by creating a space for such expression, the *Thawra Chronicles* created a space for connection and participation in a virtual sphere, allowing users to participate in the revolution from afar, making sense of their individual and collective situation. As numerous studies have shown, the online sphere allows one to participate in a networked community, find interest groups and engage, while simultaneously creating or reinforcing a shared sense of collective identity.

Because always, especially when you are living abroad, you need something to feel like, “I belong, I belong to this country.” And when we speak all together, it's a way to feel this belonging. – Contributor 2

“It was nice to see what others were doing” – Contributor 3

You feel like you've built something. It's rewarding. It's not over yet, but it's a start. – Founder 2

When asked why they decided to publish their contributions, it became clear that it was mainly connected to notions of solidarity, as they wanted to “show the people that we stand with them” (Contributor 1) or notions of pride wanting to manifest that “this movement wasn't made by international forces. We, the Lebanese people, made this” (Contributor 2). While the empirical data clearly showed that the interviewees felt sad and powerless not being able to participate on the ground in Lebanon, it also underlined that participating through online means brought them hope and the *Thawra Chronicles* reinforced a sense of home and belonging.

In addition to that, digital activist practice and virtual participation open room for self-empowerment and allow individuals or groups to exercise their agency. Further it allows to connect offline and online realities (Lynch, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2013)—the *Diaspora* tab, which hosts an interactive map with small Lebanese flags marking spaces where protests were held (see Image 10). It shows how dispersed the Lebanese diaspora is but more importantly highlights that many mobilise on- and offline. In addition, this feature allows to search for specific locations to see if there is or was a protest in one's proximity (see Image 11) and if so, allowed to access more concrete information such as time, place, or an event link (see Image 12).

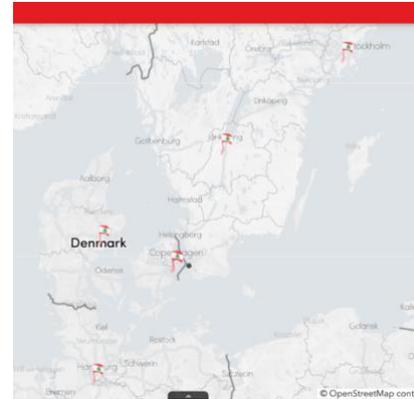


Image 10 (left): Interactive Map

Image 11 (right): Searching for “Lund”, the nearest events were shown in Denmark.

Image 12: Event information on Copenhagen protest

X

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**Protests happening in: Copenhagen**

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Country: Denmark  
 City: Copenhagen  
 Location: Blågård's Plads  
 Social: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/MeghterbinMejtemiin/ev>  
 Date: 17/11/2019

...

### *Countering Criticism of Online Participation*

Specifically online participation in a social movement, or the larger context of the movement, invites criticism of the practice, e.g., Christensen (2011:1) who views digital participation via social media as “political activities that have no impact on real-life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants”. Others criticised it would not produce tangible results or would merely be a performative act (Christensen, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; van Poell and van Dijck, 2015). In response to those criticisms, multiple thoughts come to mind:

Firstly, it is arguable that the goal of the *Thawra Chronicles* was clearly stated as “awareness raising”, not necessarily wanting to facilitate in-person mobilisation or fundraising money, but rather providing individuals with means to educate themselves further and reflect on their current engagement practices as well as their diasporic identities in relation to the broader movement, the socio-economic situation at *home*, which might have led to offline engagement or other means of support or activism<sup>28</sup>. Secondly, it needs to be taken into consideration that all contributors clearly

<sup>28</sup> In the case of the founders, it was explained that Thawra Chronicles was one of the pillars leading to the foundation of the NGO Impact Lebanon which is a network of initiatives related to Lebanon and fundraised \$9m. Other contributors stated they publish Lebanon-related works in other outlets or that they are active

stated they do not see themselves as activists as they “could do much more”. This showcases high levels of self-reflection and awareness about their own role and engagement practice with the broader social movement. Furthermore, it shows that users may have individual boundaries prohibiting them from participating more, e.g., time constraints, worries of repercussions and lack of financial means among others.

In addition, measuring the impact of media in general, on an individual or a group, is a difficult endeavour as media practices cannot be seen in a singular manner, isolated from other practices. Given the complex situation of diasporans, especially in times of social unrest at “home”, contributing to the *Thawra Chronicles* can be seen as a more time-consuming and possibly more emotionally burdensome endeavour than merely liking or sharing an already existing piece of content—which generally does not require much time or thought. Rather, contributing to the site with a piece of self-created art requests in-depth reflection practices to make sense of one's situation and expressing it through a cultural artefact (Abdelhady, 2007). This furthermore correlates to reinforcement of notions of home and (be)longing, the collective Lebanese (diasporic) identity. From this point of view, the contributions—or consumption of such—can be seen as making an internal impact on the consumers, creating, and reinforcing feelings of hope, home, and belonging. As the *Thawra Chronicles* highlights the collaborative and inclusive “we” in relation to their Lebanese identity, it may further impact and influence how diasporans think about themselves within the larger picture of the fragmented Lebanese society. In addition to that, the empirical data suggests that interacting with the outlet influenced both the contributors and founders in a positive way, especially in times of political turmoil and crisis in the homeland.

When asked if it was a successful endeavour, the founders were somewhat muted but carefully hopeful in their reaction: They said learning that the *Thawra Chronicles* brought hope to some and information to others, makes them happy, “because it means that it worked at least a bit” (Founders). In the same breath, they underlined that there is still much more to do. While Christensen was correct in predicting the “feel-good factor”, the participation and interaction with the *Thawra Chronicles* cannot be seen as a purely performative act, solely aimed at raising one's

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members in a writers' circle created by immigrants with the goal of “building bridges between cultures” through writings which were recently published in a book.

own social capital but rather as an act of in-depth confrontation and working through of the complex emotional world of diasporans.

*Taking part in the WE of the Lebanese Revolution – Countering inner-Lebanese Fragmentation?*



Image 13: Excerpt showing the we/them dichotomy

As underlined prior, the emotional connection and investedness in homeland-oriented matters is tangible. The dichotomy between the *here* and *there* while simultaneously being a group “in between” also becomes apparent when looking at the empirical material, reinforcing how complex identity negotiation, self-awareness, and sense-making processes of diasporans are. While the social movement is seen as historic due to its unifying character, the “we” has become a crucial denominator in describing the movement’s unity across historically fragmented lines, looking at the empirical data a certain paradox becomes apparent: There

is a switch between “we” and “them” (see Image 13), both found in the working on the website, e.g., on the landing page as well as throughout the conducted interviews. Usually, “them” referred to Lebanese in Lebanon, whereas “we” referred to the group of Lebanese as a whole, excluding those in power, in terms of the revolutionary movement. The “We the Lebanese” tab works as a call-to-action, reinforcing and appealing to the those subscribing to the collective Lebanese and diaspora identity. Nonetheless, it can be argued that diasporans equally position themselves in the collective “we”, while simultaneously, acknowledging that they are a somewhat distinct group, as they are not fully *there*, situating them in an “outgroup in the ingroup” (Founder 2). This underlines a practical expression of the interwovenness and hybridity of identities and individual perception of such in members of diasporan community.

#### 4 Commemorating the Revolution

We decided to create that kind of database and archives where we would put all of the news and document all of this revolution. So that people could go back and are able to trace back everything that happened reliably, and make sure that everything would be portrayed in the correct way. – Founder 1

The notion of wanting to create an archive can be connected to the desire for longevity of the content created. By actively deciding not to utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the *Thawra Chronicles* will not fall victim to the speed of those platforms whose algorithms and technical structure aim at displaying current trends, showing new content seemingly at all times. The site is not a social platform in the sense of allowing to share, like, comment, but rather manifests traits of a blog or a forum. It is not designed to allow direct one-to-one communication but to provide a more holistic understanding of the revolution. This is conducted by providing educational and informational content and the possibility to participate. Participation in this case is more “labour-intensive” than instant likes or shares, thus the site invites users to take their time and allows them to eventually come back to it as their individual timeline and agenda allows, without the need to worry that the content may be gone. A pledge posted only a month ago<sup>29</sup> exemplifies this, because even though the site has not been updated for over a year, it shows that the online site is fluid, rather than static, and some may still feel the desire to participate and do so.

Clearly, it embodies the notions of an archive as it is a collection of a variety of texts from news to art, to embedded social media channels and contributions in a comprehensive, easily accessible manner. This can be seen as a “memory project”, systematically archiving their work and action (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). While archives tend to collect pieces of historical or political importance, often deemed important only after a certain event has occurred, here, the “personal” plays a bigger role than the rigour of solely archiving what may be deemed as most important or best. It is also happening *while* the “event” is still on-going, as people are still demanding change,

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix 1 – We the Lebanese

basic services, and accountability amidst the full-blown socio-economic crisis in Lebanon and the first anniversary of the “Beirut blast”<sup>30</sup>.

Furthermore, the *Thawra Chronicles* are not “closed” as users can still contribute, even though the founders do not actively maintain it anymore (Founder 1,2,3,), which is made possible by the affordances of information and communication technology and its situation in the virtual sphere. This invites viewing the outlet as a fluid, transnationally accessible memorial. It embodies traits of a memorial, in a way that it is closely related to a specific event, aiding to preserve the “memory” of the start of the Lebanese Revolution that some deem “dead” (Founder 2) or “down” (Contributor 1) now. While it may not be a memorial in the classic sense that it commemorates an event, a person, or a holiday that has been long gone, it goes in line with the desire to create a space where users may go back to and emerge themselves or share their grievances or freshen up their memory— much like a real-life memorial where people may post letters, put down flowers or express their feelings at a later point. Oftentimes the online engagement with social and political movements or is seen as an “ephemeral” practice (Poell & van Dijck, 2015) where the cohesion is short-lived: if the *Thawra Chronicles* are to be seen as a memorial of the broader movement, and simultaneously as a tangible product of activist practice, it counteracts said ephemerality by keeping the site online as a space to come back to and reinforce the feelings of belonging to a collective “we”. It could be argued that site is there to stay—at least until the founders decide to take it offline—like a memorial, open for further contribution or the consumption of the already existing content, rather than to disappear into the proverbial abyss of oblivion which other content on social media outlets is more inclined to fall victim to due to their respective business-models and technical affordances.

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<sup>30</sup> See for example:

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanon-beirut-blast-explosion-protest-b1896688.html>
2. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/4/mired-in-crises-lebanon-marks-one-year-since-horrific-blast>
3. IG-based independent Lebanese news outlet Megaphone News  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/CSJ7\\_DRn0O/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CSJ7_DRn0O/)

*Contributing to the “new, Lebanese identity”?*

Like Bernal’s study in which the Eritrean unofficial virtual war memorial was a means to fill a void, intentionally left by the Eritrean government, the *Thawra Chronicles* need to be seen in the specific context of the country, too. In the case of Lebanon, it is crucial to acknowledge the difficulties surrounding teaching of history, which leads to a lack of “shared history” which, in turn, reinforces existing tensions, providing competing narratives of historical accounts, and impacts collective identity formation (e.g., Bahous *et al.* 2013; Abouchedid & Nasser, 2000). Lebanese history textbooks stop in 1943, the year the country gained its independence (Khater, 2016). One of the founders stated their personal experience by explaining that she had only ever learned other narratives about the Civil War when she went to university as she was, for the first time, mixed with students from different sectarian backgrounds. She further cited that “Lebanese history is not really taught in schools” and that learning about it boils down to personal interest, a statement that scholars and experts back up.

The uprising is unique as it brings together individuals from “different religious sects, regional backgrounds, ages, and social classes” (Arab Centre for Research & Policy Studies, 2019), furthermore embodying the formation of a “new political consciousness” producing a new national identity (*ibid.*). Following this train of thought, archiving the revolution needs to be seen as going beyond solely commemorating the specific event, but rather posits the *Thawra Chronicles* as a vehicle that allows to trace this new identity formation in its very process through the lens of the Lebanese diaspora. As the empirical data gathered relates to members of the Lebanese diaspora, it embodies a small piece in the larger mosaic that is Lebanese society. Furthermore, as the diaspora lives beyond the geographical boundaries of “the nation” and actively participates in matters related to the homeland, it showcases how apt it is to refer to nations as networks that transcends the constraints of spatiality (Bernal, 2014).

By commemorating the revolution and taking a stance against politically affiliated content, aiming to relay information in a non-biased way (Founders), and highlighting that one of the crucial aspects of the movement was its unity (see Landing page), the site can be seen as taking part in the formation of a new political consciousness and national identity. While it was established that diasporans are constantly negotiating their multiple dualities, it becomes clear that in this specific

case study, the maintenance of their Lebanese cultural identity was paramount and was crucially reworked *why are we doing what we are doing?* and strengthened *let us do something to participate*.

Furthermore, perhaps not at this point in time, but possibly when studying the impact of the revolution on Lebanese social cohesion in a decade's time, the *Thawra Chronicles* could be seen as a digital text embodying the very notions of and desire for societal unity. Then, overly simplified, it may be seen as a piece in a larger "archive" showcasing how a shared history may be constructed, by way of participating in making new history.

## V. CONCLUSION

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This research set out to investigate how members of the Lebanese diaspora virtually engage with an unprecedented and historic social movement in their country of origin. From an entry point of media and communication studies, the alternative online media outlet *Thawra Chronicles* was at the centre of the research endeavour. By employing a case study approach and a triangulation of semi-structured interviews and the walkthrough method, it was possible to immerse deeply into the sense-making and thought processes of the study participants. This allowed me to gather an in-depth understanding of their communication and media practices as well as their intrinsic motivations to participate in the Lebanese Revolution from afar.

*In what ways did diasporans utilize and engage with the Thawra Chronicles to participate in the Lebanese Revolution from afar?*

Throughout the analysis, it was established that the diasporan online media practices are to be seen as homeland-oriented online mobilisation efforts. Furthermore, the empirical data showed two distinct levels of engagement surrounding the *Thawra Chronicles*. By default, the founders have taken on a different role than the contributors. The sphere of engagement is to be located in the wider, public imagined realm as it is related to a social movement (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017) and the participants are to be seen as actors of transnational processes (Quinsaas, 2015).

The founders established the outlet, predominantly to create a counter-narrative to what they considered other mainstream mass media outlets who, in their view, failed to portray a full picture of the situation and the social movement as a whole. This was strongly connected to feelings of misrepresentation and the desire to show the full picture, combatting the vetted news, as well as furthering their respective agenda of “wanting to do more than protest” and contribute to the change-making agenda of the movement at large. Further, it was hinted at how the outlet can be seen vis-à-vis the Lebanese media landscape. Generally, the outlet can be seen as going in line with Kidd’s description of alternative media activism, namely “don’t hate the media—become the media.” (2003:50) and shows that the founders used it to negotiate their emotions surrounding their diasporic and Lebanese identity in a creative manner. They have meticulously researched, fact-checked and aggregated news pieces, art works, further educational resources as well as built a platform open for participation, making it possible for others to participate and thus, becoming a vehicle for collective action—they have become the media. Their activist stance is further reinforced in the Bill of Rights and Pledge sections which connects them closely to the overall demands of the movement. Hence, the founders can be seen as “identity based social entrepreneurs” (Koinova, 2016:501) who take homeland-oriented action in a transnational setting with the goal of improving the situation at home (Moss, 2020; Sheffer, 2003) through means of digital activism and awareness raising.

The contributors used the *Thawra Chronicles* as an alternative source of information, through primarily visiting the site to stay on top of the news. Further, they have browsed through the other sub-sites, consuming the pledges and contributions of others. Their engagement with the alternative media site started out as observant and turned into them becoming active contributors. This can be seen as diasporic media practice, especially in times of fast-past events and crises at home when the news landscape is highly polarized, while also connecting to Lebanon and the historically unprecedented movement. Seeing how others, members of the same community, think, express and articulate their feelings, helped make them feel like they belong and are part of a larger community. That community is bound together not by geographical markers but by a shared sense of home, culture, and values. Their active contribution can be seen as a further step of the individual processes of making sense of their situation, working through emotion, and expressing it artistically. Through their creative processes and their contribution to the online outlet, they have

taken their individual engagement from the private to the public sphere. None of them considered themselves activists, as they could do “much more”, showing their reflective practice.

Generally, founding the outlet and engaging with it can be seen as acting on opportunity and thus taking agency. These opportunities were established to be in relation to financial affordances to set the *Thawra Chronicles* up as well as employing professional skill to create and contribute to it. More importantly, the opportunities related to the countries of residence and their respectively high levels of freedom of expression and Internet penetration. This was especially interesting in juxtaposition to the voiced concerns about Lebanon-sided repercussion.

*How did the engagement with the Thawra Chronicles create or re-enforce values of community, cohesion, and (be)longing for Lebanese diasporans in times of political turmoil?*

In line with Cohen (2008) stating the positive connotations of retaining a diaspora identity as a means to enhance creativity, it can be said the *Thawra Chronicles* are a prime example. Especially since the study’s participants elaborated that creating and contributing to it gave them feelings of belonging to a community as well as hope in a time where their emotions were heavy. Stating they felt powerless and sad being unable to be in Lebanon and participate on the ground, their engagement with the *Thawra Chronicles* can be seen as a process of sense-making of the entanglement/separation dichotomy of the diasporic identity and further as the commemoration of a diaspora community through the mind, artifacts, and a shared imagination (Cohen, 2008). By way of the Internet, as a “quotidian resource” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010:xi) for migrated individuals, they were able to create and maintain a loose network of transnational diaspora connections which provided them with the possibility of tapping into a larger group of like-minded individuals, thus, allowing them to act upon their (be)longings to their homeland. Especially the “critical event” (Sökefeld, 2006) of the Lebanese revolution triggered their individual need articulate and thus their mobilisation in a bid to counter the emotions connected with the inability to be *there*.

This exemplifies both the fluidity and hybridity of their identities as a state of being and becoming (Hall, 1994; Bauman, 2001). Further, as the “ground” of the movement has been moved to the

digital sphere, it provided an opportunity to connect to Lebanon and to make sense of the cultural duality. Due to its location on the Internet, the *Thawra Chronicles* were inclusive both in the sense of access but further as it allowed all interested to participate at a low threshold, e.g., those without financial means to contribute to charities or else, by giving space to artistic expression or inform them about events close to their current location.

While some scholars would argue it was purely serving a “feel good” purpose or it did not make an impact or a sustained collective “we”, I would counter argue. I found that while contributions could be seen as a performative act, the amount of emotional and creative labour that went into the participation in conjunction with the larger context of living in the diaspora is showcasing individual and collective identity work. Thus, I would argue that showing their work is a crucial part of participating and connecting with others, while simultaneously carrying notions of solidarity, of “We show up for you and we stand with you”, if not in physical form, then by way of the virtual sphere which could be seen as a strengthening factor of group cohesion both within the diaspora community and also the Lebanese community at large. In addition, the direct impact is hard to measure, nonetheless, I made an argument for the internal impact the engagement had for both founders and contributors. By that I mean that the media practice cannot be seen in isolation and thus, may or may not have influenced or triggered further thought processes, e.g., in relation to the “new Lebanese identity” or other means of contributions on- or offline.

It can be said that both groups have utilized the *Thawra Chronicles* as a means to connect to the social and political situation at home and actively participating. Their participation, from creating to contributing, can be seen as an exercise of sense-making, acknowledging their inability to be *there* which embodies the entanglement/separation characteristic of life in the diaspora. They have used it to feel part of the movement, to learn about the facts but further to gather insights into the emotions and feelings of other members of the community, based on shared experiences, shared origin and shared cultural identity; anchored in the easily accessible, transnational online sphere. Thus, the group cohesion was strengthened, to what extent and how it may translate into action, is impossible to measure.

***What roles did the diaspora-run Thawra Chronicles play in the broader context of the Lebanese Revolution of 2019?***

Throughout the thesis, the alternative online outlet has been contextualised as a digital activist endeavour, rendering its founders activists accordingly. The outlet has served multiple roles which can be divided into three main sections.

The first section is related to production and dissemination of knowledge and information. It has predominantly served in the role as a *broker of information*, catering to both Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike by providing concrete, daily news for a period of 220 days. Further, it has played a role as a multiplier of knowledge by posing as a *curator of educational resources* through linking through other channels compiling relevant sources of further information, effectively multiplying their reach and furthering visibility of the movement and its agenda.

The second section is embodied by the participatory nature as the *Thawra Chronicles* has provided a safe space for contributions, thus it played a role in *inviting participation*. Through the possibility of remaining anonymous, users could upload their own creative output or pledge to Lebanon. This allowed for creative expression of grievances, showing solidarity with other Lebanese and facilitated exchange between like-minded individuals, in this case, based on assumption, those who identify themselves as members of the Lebanese community, within or beyond its borders. In a time of unprecedented social upheaval and crisis in the country of origin—real or imagined—users found their own emotions met, it reinforced their feelings of belonging to Lebanon while simultaneously longing to be there, to protest and to participate physically and witness the unifying power of the movement for themselves. This role of the website was important exactly because it allowed the contributors (and those who perhaps only consumed the content) to feel like they are part of it, by way of the online sphere. This leads to the third section, which is connected to the “memory-project” and memorial notion, it includes the role of the *Commemorator*. In conjunction with the historic notion of the movement, this is particularly interesting as the website could—if kept online—function as an archive-type memorial that is fluid and can still be contributed to.

To conclude, the *Thawra Chronicles* has played various roles in the mobilisation of diaspora members. Through its site structure and respective content, it is a moderate digital activist

endeavour which allowed members of the diaspora to participate from afar—acting on given opportunity structures it served a “major function” (Koinova, 2011) of enabling sharing of sentiments that may be frowned upon in the country of origin. Its impact may be hard to measure as media and communication practices are not always measurable in tangible results, but it cannot be forgotten that they also cannot be seen in isolation. Thus, I believe that it made an important contribution to the movement in raising awareness, disseminating knowledge as well as posing as a safe harbour for expression of critique, grievances, and solidarity, ultimately being a vehicle for emotional expression, reinforcing notions of home and belonging in a virtual setting, overcoming the physical inability to be there.

This research endeavour has contributed to knowledge on how diasporans mobilise by way of alternative online media and how they have made sense of their role against the backdrop of a social movement in the country of origin. While the sample was small, it provided insight into their motivations, their respective triggers to becoming politically active and how identity work is conducted. Furthermore, it has provided context-dependent knowledge on media and communication practices surrounding the Lebanese Revolution and thus social movements in the Middle East.

### *Final Thoughts*

I, the social intruder, have personally learned a great deal from my interviewees and this research as a whole. Motivated by my own failed study abroad experience in Lebanon, I was fortunate enough to delve deeper into Lebanese culture, history, and politics and combine it with my interest in alternative media. Constantly reflecting on my own position in this research and always carefully considering words and phrases, I aimed at letting the empirical material speak for itself, concentrating on connecting the dots. I have tried my best to dissect this case through the theoretical framework and paying close attention to visualising my interviewee’s thought processes through “evidence” found on the website. Nonetheless, I found it sometimes difficult to criticise, especially in regard to impact, as I felt that I am in no position to question feelings and sense-making processes of my interviewees. Yet, the interviewee’s willingness and patience to explain the bigger context of the crisis from their point of view allowed me to understand the complexities of Lebanon and diaspora life, creating in-depth knowledge. Further, I understand that

this research created a very specific and context-dependent excerpt of knowledge and exploration of human affairs that could have easily taken a different turn, e.g., if the sample was larger or even if the interviewees were different.

### *Further Research*

Taking into consideration that all interviewees shared their thoughts on repercussions and potential security threats, has led me to think about future research. I believe that it would be of great interest to research digital activism in connection to transnational repression. While it is already apparent that Lebanese authorities have “stepped up repressions” against demonstrators in Lebanon (Amnesty International, 2021), it would be a very exciting research endeavour to investigate whether these repressions will find their way into the virtual sphere. More specifically, to ask how this may affect digital diaspora activism or whether new modes of collective action will be employed. This research could draw on Moss’ work as well as previous research on Arab social movements, such as the Arab uprisings and put it into a comparative perspective investigating whether activists have taken cues from it and if they adapted their media strategies to create longer lasting impact.

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# APPENDICES

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## Appendix 1 – Walkthrough Method

### Thawra Chronicles

I initially came across the blog in January 2020 as I was scheduled to go to Beirut, Lebanon, for an exchange semester and wanted to inform and educate myself more about the current situation. Furthermore, I wanted to look at alternative outlets and learn what messages they are conveying opposed to (Western-)centric news outlets in English and German (the languages I am fluent in). When I decided to use the Thawra Chronicles for my thesis, I did a thorough walk-through in a structured, systematic but straightforward manner in order to understand as much as possible in order to analyse the alternative medium but furthermore to build the interview guides incorporating findings from the walkthrough.

#### 1. How can I reach the website?

It is optimized for both mobile and desktop use. I found it through a simple Google search whilst looking for information about the situation in Lebanon in English, beyond mass-media outlets.

#### 2. How is it structured?

There is a scrollable main landing page (see next page) with text and imagery, including a top-level navigation (1) with seven tabs (Timeline, Talks, Diaspora, Art, Social Media, Contribute and We the Lebanese, and a footer (2) including similar tabs and direct access to “Bill of Rights” and the “Email Us” contact button.

(1)



(2)



IT'S TIME FOR  
**An Ethical Lebanon.**

October 17, 2019, was a tipping point for Lebanon. It is on this historic day that people marched together in unity to reject the status quo

Raging against a nepotistic and corrupt ruling elite who had been duping us for decades, the Lebanese people broke free from sectarian and political allegiances

Together, they transformed their protest into one of the largest revolutions the country has ever seen; one that was heard all around the world



**THE PILLARS OF THE REVOLUTION**

**United under a single flag**

Since October 17, 2019, the people of Lebanon have been narrating their own story under the watchful gaze of a skeptical world. Waving only the national flag as their beacon of hope, they are standing together in complete harmony – their united voice finally emanating from the depth of their shared humanity, rather than the sectarian communities in which they were born into



**United through art & freedom of expression**

It does not need to bleed for it to lead: a motto that Lebanese protestors have been living by since the eruption of the 2019 revolution



Filling the streets with varying forms of artistic expression, the Lebanese have managed to uphold their momentum: sketches paired with strong and catchy captions; graffiti; mural calligraphy; chants; jokes; memes; orchestrated music performances; and dance stunts have all been part of the people's political dissent and their unyielding resistance to an unsavory political elite

As a result, the streets of Lebanon have quickly metamorphosed into colorful canvases documenting the tumultuous yet highly exciting journey to change

**United in peace & harmony**

Flourishing the streets with peaceful protests, the Lebanese people have been sending a loud message to the world about who they really are and what they aspire for. Despite sporadic yet calculated attempts to stir trouble among them in different cities around the country, protestors have resisted violence, choosing to spread laughter, joy, and shared love instead



**United towards a shared goal**

The Lebanese people have had their patience tried for decades. Taking to the streets in a collective show of political dissent, united in their revolutionary plea, their united voice is screaming change: political, social, financial, and civic

Their most famous slogan (كلين يعني كلين) is highly comprehensive: it calls the bluff of the ruling elite and summons it to exit promptly, as a stepping stone towards major reforms

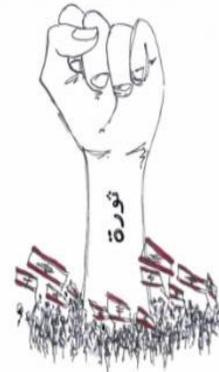


**THE CORRUPTION IN NUMBERS**



[Learn more](#)

**ABOUT US**



**Thawra Chronicles**

Our mission is to share Thawra Chronicles with the world by reporting vetted news; relaying a timeline of daily events; aggregating all the art that emerged from it; and offering a forum to exchange thoughts and perspectives

**THE REVOLUTION**

- Timeline
- Art
- Talks
- Diaspora
- Pledge
- Instagram

**THE MISSION**

- Contribute
- Bill of Rights

**CONTACT US**

- Email

**THE REVOLUTION IN NUMBERS**

**35+**

COUNTRIES REACHED

Did you know that 11M Lebanese lived abroad? Today, from North America to Asia, they are all standing together despite geographical boundaries

**90+**

CITIES

From Berlin to Boston, London to Lisbon, Milan to Miami, the Lebanese have established a global footprint

**2M**

PROTESTERS

Over a third of the Lebanese population have already taken to the streets

[Learn more](#)

### 3. Are there any other pages? Which ones?

The top-level navigation indicates seven subpages, listed in the following:

## Timeline

The timeline starts with a prologue and a timeline on the left indicating the different weeks of the protest. It starts with “Week 1” and ends with “Week 22” and the words “Still ongoing..” (not pictured). See screenshot below for an exemplary excerpt from the Timeline page, it became apparent that this feature is the “heart” of the outlet.

**Day 3 | October 19, 2019**

Schools, banks, offices, and shops remained closed. People were on the streets at all hours, night and day, fighting to abolish the ineffective and corrupt cabinet. It is said that 1.5 million people gathered in mass protests, yet there are no statistics to provide exact numbers. All we know is that this is the biggest revolution Lebanon has ever seen.

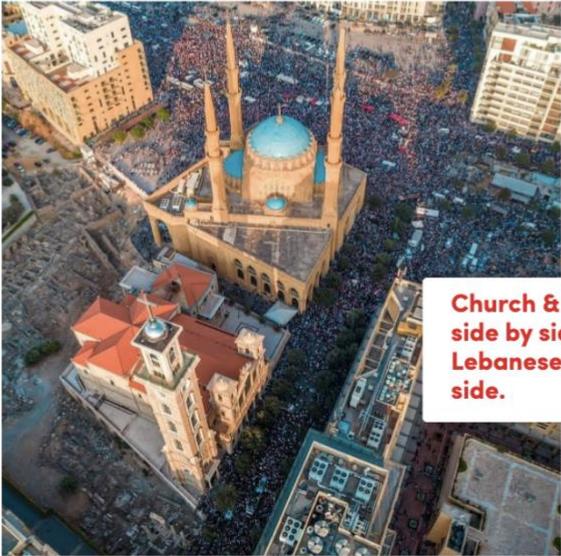
The Lebanese forces (Ouwet) resigned on this day.

There is light, pulling the Lebanese people out of the dark abyss of devastation, encouraging them to keep fighting. The first light came from London and then another one from Madrid. The next from Montreal, traveling all the way to [Washington DC](#), [New York](#), [Los Angeles](#) and [San Francisco](#). They all brought light and those lights shone only in one direction—Lebanon.

The Diaspora was a big source of support in keeping the economy afloat through the years and its support doesn't falter as it continues to support the people who are protesting on the ground. After all, there's no place like home, right?

“*They think the people are herds of sheep," says a man who gave his name only as Bashara. "But they don't understand. The people aren't sheep anymore."*

Rebecca Collard, Time



**Church & mosque, side by side. 1.5M Lebanese, side by side.**

## Talks

In this subpage, **24 entries** can be found. They include links to video recorded talks about politics, psychology and a wide array of topics – held in Lebanon and beyond. On the left, there are filter options such as *Categories*, *Organizations* and *Speakers*.



### Filter

#### Categories

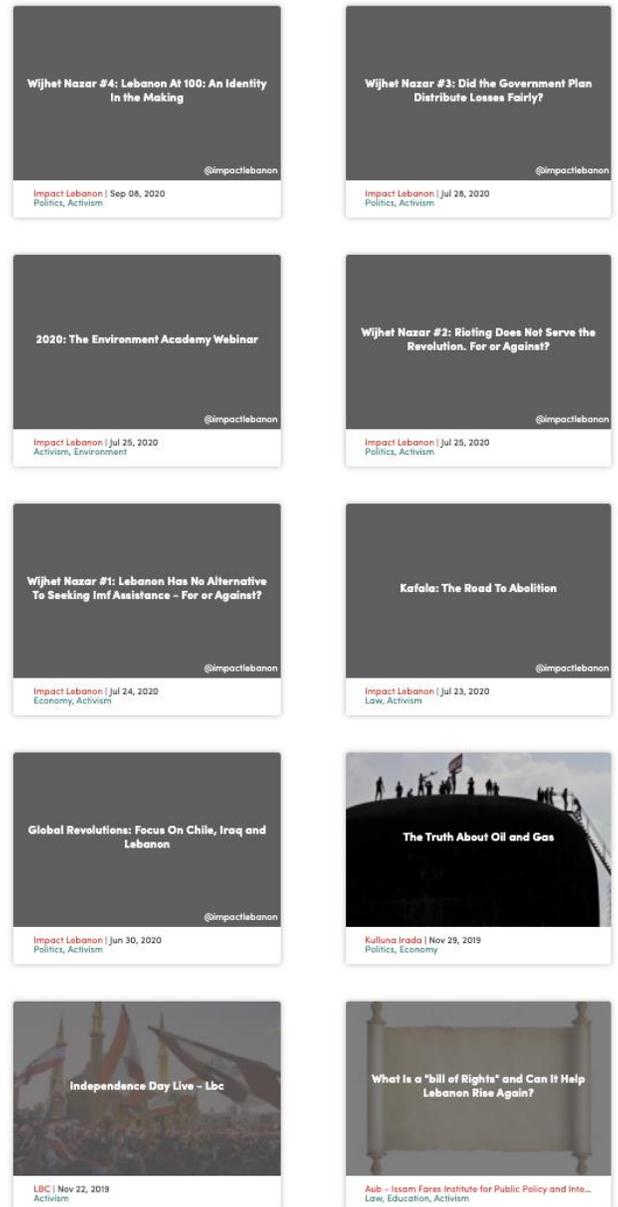
- Psychology
- Politics
- Law
- Corruption
- Economy
- Education
- Activism
- Environment

#### Organizations

- Bedna Na3ref
- London School of Economics (LSE)
- Life
- LBC
- El 3ama
- Aub - Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (ifi)
- Kulluna Irada
- Impact Lebanon

#### Speakers

- Mia Atoui
- Dr. Carmen Geha
- Dr. Ghina Ismail
- Dr. Halima Kaakour
- Maître Nadim Saeed
- Dr. Hiba Khodr
- Prof. Nasser Yassin
- Ms. Nayla Geagea
- Mr. Gilbert Doumitt
- Dr. Bilal Malasab
- Prof. Erik Berglof (chair)
- Mr. Hicham Safieddine
- Ms. Sophie Chamas
- Gilbert Achcar
- Maha Shuayb
- Paul Raphael
- Joumanna Bercetche
- Nassim Taleb
- El 3ama
- Hussein El Achi
- Gino Raïdy
- Jad Chaaban
- Nisrine Chahine
- Pierre Issa
- LBC
- Wissam Yafi
- Hala Bejjani
- Sibylle Rizk
- Christina Abi Haidar
- Laury Haytayan
- Sami Atallah
- Ziad Samaha
- Chloe Kattar
- Lilav Ihsan
- Paula Soto
- Dipendra Uprety
- Nizar Saghieh
- Rahaf Dandash
- Amine Issa
- Marwan Mikhael
- Nizar Hassan
- Dr. Hicham Safieddine
- Nafez Zouk
- Gino Raïdy
- Ibrahim Halawi
- Nahida Khalil
- Samir Skayni
- Izzat Al Ayyoubi
- Dr. Najat Saliba
- Sammy Kayed
- Dr. Georges Corm
- Ziyad Baroud
- Dr. Rima Majed
- Dr. Henri Chaoul
- Nassib Ghobril



## Diaspora

The Diaspora tab shows an interactive map with a plethora of small-scale Lebanese flags pointed to countries and cities where a demonstration was held. By zooming in and clicking on a flag, the user is served with information about the exact location of the protest (bottom screenshots)

There is also room for **participation** as it is possible to search for specific locations and edit the map to add protest locations (or remove those who may have been placed in error).

Revolution • ثورة Timeline Talks **Diaspora** Art Social Media Contribute We the Lebanese

### THE LEBANESE DIASPORA

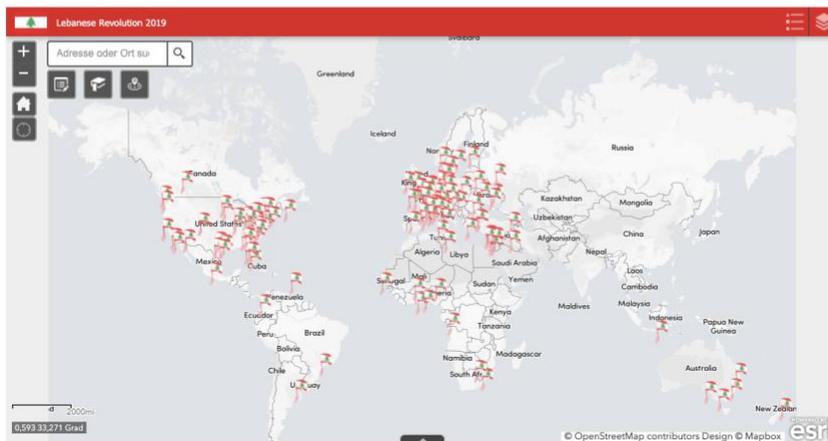
This interactive collaborative map is purposed to serve as an online archive of the local and global Lebanese protests for the 2019 revolution.

To use the map - toggle through the different areas of interest by pressing on the protestor (use the bookmark widget to focus on a specific area i.e. Europe).

You can also use the available widgets to find the closest protest to you ("near me" widget). In these widgets, we have embedded links to social media platforms that have either been responsible for organizing events or contributed to endorsing the revolution with facts and graphical representations.

We might have missed some protests or have not filled in the full information of a protest due to lack of available data. Therefore, as this is a public platform, we encourage editing errors, adding in protests and filling in blank boxes.

Our goal is keeping this map alive to document the resistant Lebanon and its predominant global diaspora.



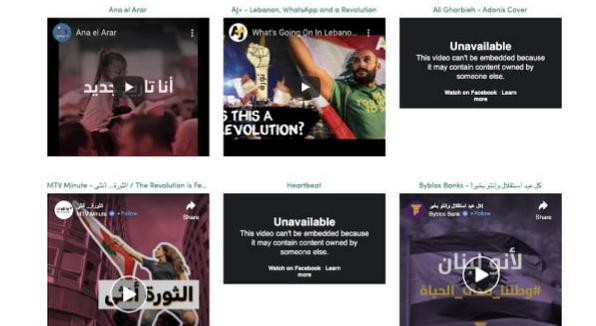
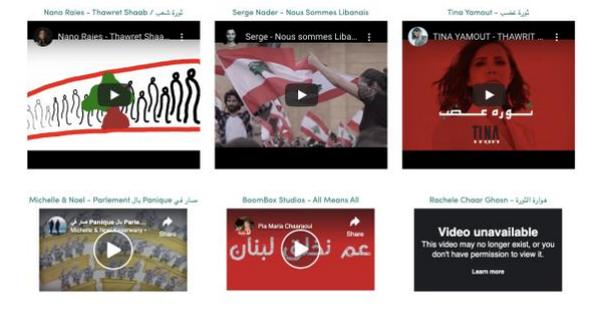
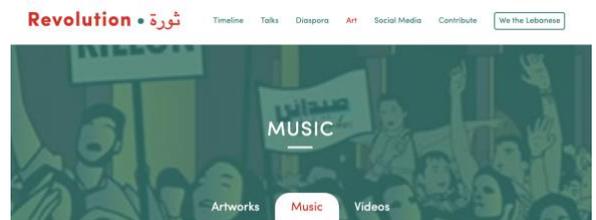
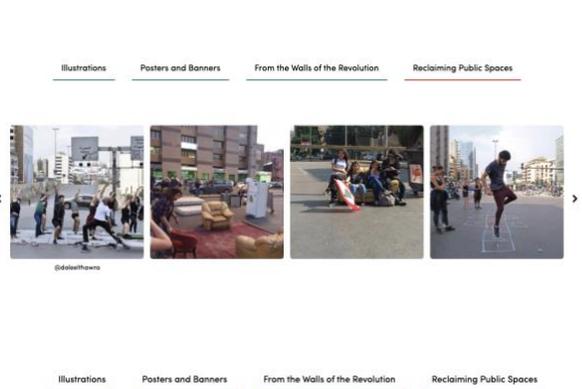
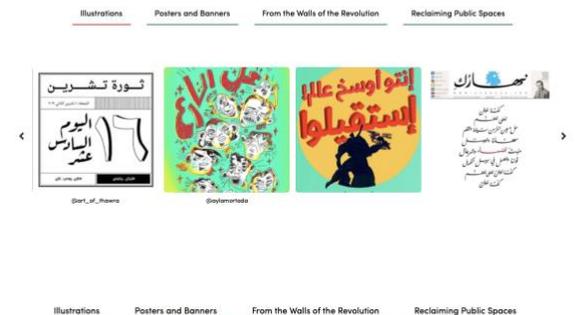
1 of 1

Protests happening in: Jönköping

Country: Sweden  
City: Jönköping  
Location: Hovrättstorget Hovrättstorget, 55321 Jönköping  
Social: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/LebaneseInSweden/event>  
Date: 23/10/2019

# Art

The Art tab is aggregating different types of art and is divided into the categories *Artworks*, *Music* and *Videos*. The *Artworks* include four different categories: *Illustrations*, *Posters and Banners*, *From the Walls of the Revolution* and *Reclaiming Public Spaces* (screenshots on the left side) which are all arranged in carousels.



Content	Number	Languages Identified	Further Information
<b>ARTWORKS</b>			
Illustrations	120	Arabic, English	Some have Social Media handles
Posters and Banners	83	Arabic, English, French	Posters and Banners from across the world (Eiffel tower was visible), from protests
From the Walls of the Revolution	72	Arabic, English, French	Mainly graffiti across walls, shop fronts and the street
Reclaiming Public Spaces	48	N/A	Imagery of reclaimed spaces, squares, houses, sights
<b>MUSIC</b>			
<i>Videos</i>	15	<i>Arabic, English, French</i>	Titles include “Nous sommes Libanaise” (We are Lebanese), All means All, Care about Us, Au Nom du Peuple (In the Name of the People), Mon Rêve (My Dream)
<b>VIDEOS</b>			
<i>Videos</i>	18	<i>Arabic, English</i>	Titles include MTV Minute and Lebanon, WhatsApp and a Revolution (AJ+; Al Jazeera), Human Chain, Lebanons Demands Explained, #imfunding the revolution, Thawra Around the World; <b>mainly explanatory videos of the situation</b>

## Social Media

The Social Media tab is also divided into six different tabs – *News*, *Activism*, *Illustrations*, *Photographies*, *Resources* and *Other*.

The aim is to disseminate the “right information” and the right sources” (see left)

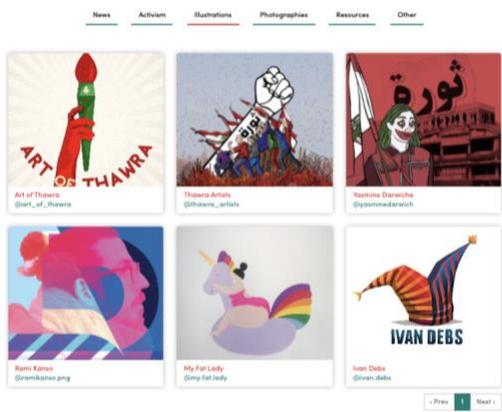
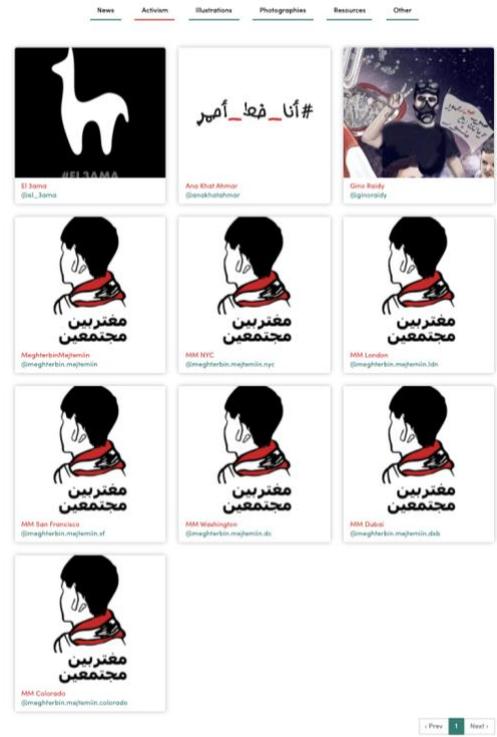
The screenshots illustrate the structure of the different tabs, the red bar indicates which tab is “open”, e.g. News underlines in red → News Tab is open.

## Revolution • ثورة

Timeline Talks Diaspora Art Social Media Contribute We the Lebanese



News Activism Illustrations Photographies Resources Other



Content	Number	Languages Identified	Further Information
News	9	Arabic, English	Including <i>Corruption Facts</i> , <i>Lebanon Times</i> , <i>Megaphone News</i>
Activism	10	Arabic, English	Activists
Illustration	6	n/a	Different styles
Photographies	3	English	Private People (Film maker/Photographer)
Resources	5	Arabic, English	Civic Organizations/NGOs, education
Other	3	Arabic, English, French	Prose Collection, Images of Lebanon's beauty, Comedian

## Contribute

This section is open for all users to make their contribution. There are no specifications as to what the content can (or cannot) be uploads.

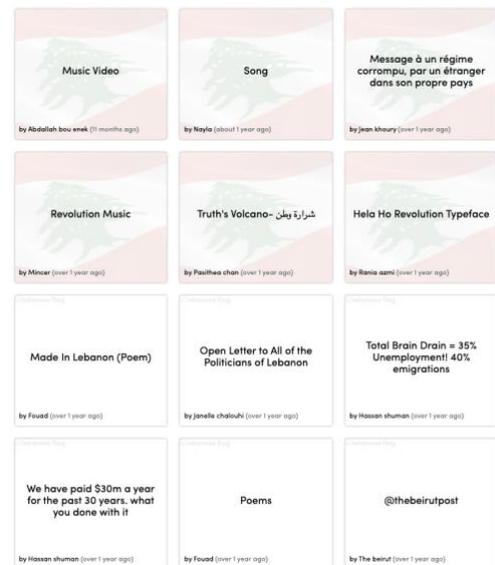
Contributors have to follow the link and are guided to a form where they have to put their data (see below).

The total of 18 contributions include music videos, poems, open letters (see table) – but also a non-revolution related piece, hence the number 17.

Additionally, it was difficult to figure out who was behind the contributions which will be further elaborated in the *Sampling*.



### Your Contributions



Tables breaking down the nature of the content of the contributions  
(also appear in Sampling)

<b>Contributions</b>	
Total of Contributions	<b>18</b>
2019 Revolution related	17
Contributors (doubles counted as 1)	15
Original Content (provable)	14
Clearly Identifiable + Contactable (though open public social profiles)	6
Contacted	6
Response + Interview	3

<b>Types of all Revolution-related Contributions</b>	
Music/Song	3
Font	1
Poem	2
Open Letter	2
SM Handles / No Content	2
Illustration	1
Header / No Content	5
Header / One Word	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>

## We the Lebanese

This is another participatory feature of the blog. There are two categories, the *Pledges* and the *Bill of Rights*. The total of the pledges is 58, below you can see an excerpt of the pledges and the different listed things the founders of the blog are pledging to. Some of these were posted anonymously while others have first names. It was decided not to analyse the pledges as it is incredibly difficult to determine where in the world the pledges were coming from.

The Bill of Rights clearly states the demands the Lebanese people have:



### We the Lebanese Demand

WE, the People of Lebanon, having endured hardship and humiliation from a divided, unjust, and dysfunctional system, have united to reconcile and overcome our sad past, eliminate deficiencies and abuses, strengthen our state, and renovate our nation. In so doing, we strive towards a brighter and more prosperous future for all. WE hereby demand the following inherent rights be asserted immediately, serving as legally binding reaffirmations or amendments to all those provided by our Constitution:

#### 1. Reasserting the People's Power through Timely, Direct, Democratic Elections and Referenda

WE, the Lebanese people including our Diaspora, reassert ourselves as the sole source and beneficiary of all power conferred to the Lebanese state. WE demand timely elections and the right for any citizen above the age of 18 to vote. WE demand a direct vote for the highest office in the land. Furthermore, WE demand to hold a national referendum, if 10% or more of our population demands it.

#### 2. Running for Public Office, Transparency, Accountability, and Extensions

WE assert the right for any Lebanese citizen regardless of gender, race, disability, or religion to run unconditionally for any public office in any recognized Lebanese jurisdiction. WE demand the right to have qualified public representatives compete over positions of power, and that those WE democratically elect, including parliament, operate in full transparency with public voting records. Abuse of vested power and trust, will henceforth render such representation void. The extension of terms to any public office shall not be allowed without holding a referendum in the respective jurisdiction, to be passed by absolute majority.

#### 3. Freedom of Information, Accountability, Handling of Public Funds, and National Debt

WE demand freedom of information from our government and full and timely accountability in the handling of our sovereign accounts. A government unable to provide a budget within the legal time frame is considered expired. Further acquisition of national debt shall be permitted only if the people approve it through referendum. WE assert the right to prosecute any public official for gross incompetence, corruption or the mishandling of public assets, removing any statute of limitations.

#### 4. Protection of Private Property, Privacy and Free Expression

WE demand that our private and intellectual property be protected and not subjected to breach or misappropriation. Furthermore, WE demand that our privacy be respected physically and virtually, and reassert our right for free and unimpeded expression.

#### 5. People's Right to Education, Social Services, Economic Opportunity, Fair Wages, and Just Taxation

WE demand the right to comprehensive excellence in public education. WE demand to live in dignity and assert our right for adequate healthcare and social security that provide us peace of mind. WE demand fair wages and for dues to be paid in a timely manner. WE reassert our rights for social justice based on equitable economic opportunity all over the nation, regardless of race, gender, disability, or religion. Furthermore, WE demand just tariffing and taxation, commensurate to the people's economic constraints.

#### 6. Uninterrupted Basic Services, Transportation, and Infrastructure Provided at a Reasonable Cost

WE demand the right to receive basic services such as electricity, clean water, sewage treatment, trash collection, mail service, and telecommunications consistently, without interruption, and at reasonable cost. WE demand the right to have nationwide public transportation and infrastructure, reaching all corners of the country.

#### 7. People's Right to Clean and Sanitized Environment, Public Parks, Beaches and Historic Monuments

WE demand the right to live in a clean and sanitized environment all over Lebanon--be it in the air, on land, or in the sea--assuring us of a healthy sustenance. WE reassert our right to enjoy Lebanon's public parks, beaches, and historic monuments. WE demand the state reclaim and conserve all our public heritage, and that no concession shall be given that takes away the People's unlettered access.

#### 8. Equal Personal Status Treatment Regardless of Gender, Race or Religion

WE reassert the right of equal treatment regardless of gender, race, disability, or religion, and WE demand that it be applied to all personal status issues including, but not be limited to, civil contracts and citizenship.

#### 9. Improper Seizure, Due Process, and Legal Review

WE demand that any legal proceedings against any citizen be held in civilian courts and processed within a reasonable time frame. WE reassert that no person shall be held against their free will or have their property seized without due process. Furthermore, WE demand the right as individuals to appeal to the Constitutional Council when faced with a law that runs counter to our rights.

#### 10. Judicial Representation of People and Swift Implementation of Laws

WE, the people, demand the right for direct representation within the judiciary through elected judges, juries, ombudsmen, and public trials. WE demand that our laws be executed by the state in a reasonable time frame; and WE retain the right as individuals or groups for legal action against any relevant authority found to be denying, improperly implementing, or breaking the law.

#### 11. To Live in Justice, Security, and Peace under State Protection

WE demand to live in peace and security and that justice be served on all 10,452 sq. km of Lebanese territory, under the full protection of the Lebanese state. No foreign armies shall be allowed on Lebanese soil without the People's express consent through referendum. WE, the Citizens, retain the right of self-defense in case our state legitimately fails to provide us such security.

#### 12. Collective Rights shall be of, by and for the People of Lebanon

No law, belief, or common practice shall curtail, abridge, or infringe on our collective rights. Any and all powers not enumerated or provisioned to the state shall remain uniquely of, amendable only by, and enacted solely for the People of Lebanon.



## We the Lebanese Pledge to

1. Unite together in solidarity for a better Lebanon
2. Fight corruption and the embezzlement of public funds
3. Hold the political class accountable for their transgressions
4. Abolish political confessionalism and sectarianism
5. Heal wounds from the past, learn from them and move forward
6. Recognize that diversity is an asset
7. Safeguard our freedom of speech and expression
8. Elect leaders based on the right qualifications and expertise
9. Refuse the politicization of our basic human rights
10. Enable watchdogs, monitoring institutions and regulatory bodies
11. Uphold the rule of law and demand an independent judiciary
12. Encourage a healthy national debate to define concrete reforms
13. Require local and sustainable economic reform
14. Advocate for social justice

### What will you pledge?

First Name (Optional)

Email (Optional)

This information will be kept confidential

What do you pledge to do in the name of your country? \*

Check the box if you want your pledge to be anonymous

Submit a Pledge

### Your Pledges

**Imad** (about 2 months ago) - Change the constitution, change the electoral law ,one man one vote ,no more 50/50 ,real democracy,no confessionalism

### Your Pledges

**Anonymous** (7 months ago) - There is a petition and we need more signature. Can you please help and send us ideas how to get more signatures

<https://www.change.org/p/president-of-the-united-states-freeze-assets-of-lebanese-politicians-outside-lebanon-264270e0-95d5-44aa-949c-624a4d0bde7>

**Anonymous** (about 1 year ago) - This is the first time in my life I feel proud of the country of my forefathers. I made me actively research to learn more of my own history. This has brought me peace, and from what I've discovered so far, I am slowly, finally growing to love and respect this country. I had decided before to stay in Lebanon where my family is, but today I'm actually beginning to want to, and I pledge to make other people understand and love my culture, love those crazy toughened slightly cynical and fiercely protective cousins of mine.

**Monica** (about 1 year ago) - Am Lebanese above all and as a True Lebanese who adore my Country It is my duty to protect it demographically and restore the Beauty and Natural Features of each area in Lebanon, replace all ugly buildings and plant many NATIVE Trees. Palm trees were never native to Lebanon

**Miluna** (over 1 year ago) - I pledge to love my country!

**Anonymous** (over 1 year ago) - I pledge to return and work in my beloved country Lebanon.

**Anonymous** (over 1 year ago) - I pledge to remember October 17th. I pledge to protect my constitutionally granted rights. I pledge to vote, contribute, work, and invest for a better Lebanon.

**Patricia** (over 1 year ago) - I am trying to pass on information about the revolution in English to those in the country who don't know Arabic. I am supporting Regenerate Lebanon organized by Recycle Lebanon in whatever way I can. I am circulating Revolution posts from different WhatsApp groups to each other to help us all be informed. And I am spending time each day studying what I call Revolution Arabic, the specific vocabulary, sayings, and chants of the protest.

**Mc** (over 1 year ago) - Keep demanding for a civic state so that all communities are protected as nationals. To request a better implementation of our laws and regulations to protect our environment. And to do what is in my power to help/assist wherever possible 😊

### 3. What is the colour scheme/tone of the website?

The colours of the Lebanese flag are very apparent in the design (white, red, green) as well as a plethora of artworks that reproduce that colour scheme through illustrations.

On the front page, a lot of the illustrations include the Lebanese flag (which became a “big” symbol in protests during the revolution), also used as markers on the interactive protest map.

The tone is “activist” in the sense that it wants to change the current status quo (see text on front page or bill of rights for example). Furthermore, the term “unity” pops up frequently.

**Thought:** It becomes apparent that the people who run the website seem to be Lebanese but they may not reside in the country (e.g. “Raging against a nepotistic and corrupt ruling elite who had been duping **us** for decades, the Lebanese people broke free from sectarian and political allegiances. Together, **they** transformed **their** protest into one of the largest revolutions the country has ever seen; one that was heard all around the world.”)

### 4. What were my first thoughts when browsing through the website?

- It was created to share knowledge and aggregate different types of art that have emerged through the period of the Revolution.
- The blog has participatory features (pledges + contributions) and is structured in a user-friendly way.
- The news archive seems to be the central part of the blog and is easily accessible, easy to read – it doesn’t state where the news has been retrieved from.
- Target audience: All those interested in the events, contributions/pledges seem to be made mostly by Lebanese people.
- It is unclear who is behind the website. No Social Media profiles, but contact through email possible.
- Different roles of the website, difficult to determine who it is for. It seems like it caters to various audiences, both Lebanese or diasporic as well as others who want to learn about the events.

#### Possible Questions for founders:

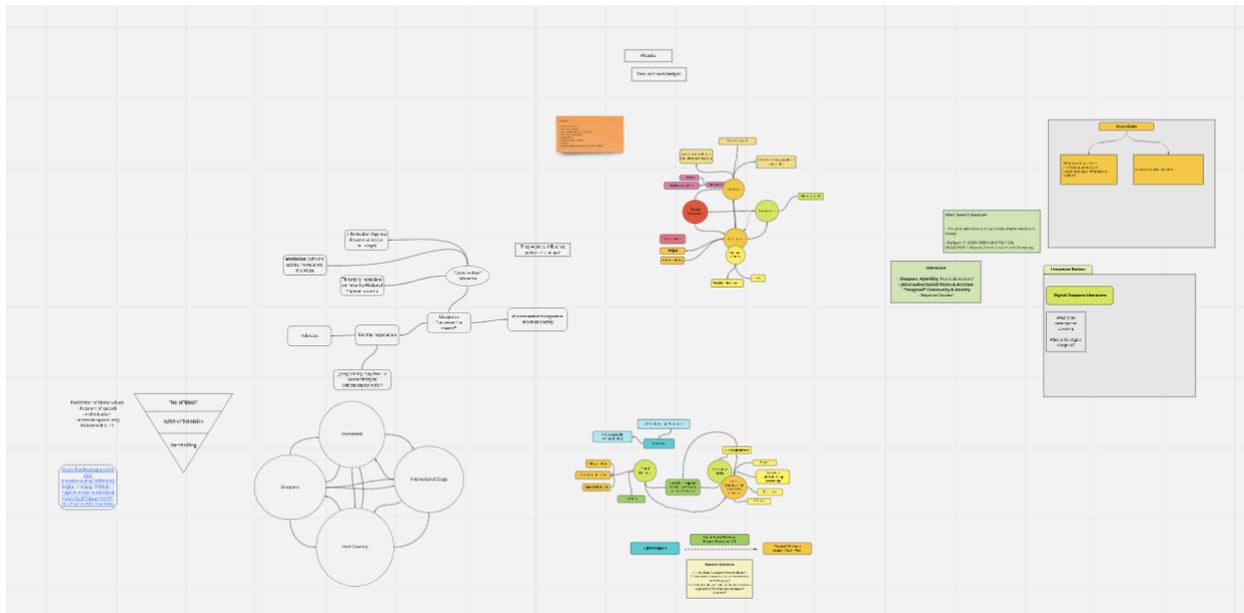
1. How big is the team? Where is it based? Who is part of it (age, gender, occupation, ..)
2. What was the reason to create it?
3. How is it financed?

4. Can anybody upload? Is there some censorship?
5. Who is the target audience?
6. What was/is the reach?

### Possible Questions for contributors:

1. How did you find it?
2. How did you interact with it?
3. What was your contribution? Why did you contribute?
4. What feelings were connected to it for you?

### Reflections after Walkthrough



## Appendix 2 – Interviewees

### Finding the Sample

This table shows the process of sampling the contributors. Firstly, I have identified the contributors, noted what type of content they uploaded and whether it led to another platform. This was important because it allowed me to identify them further. Additionally, I have cross-checked if they have uploaded content that was traceable to another author and whether it was related to the revolution. Afterwards, I have tried to search whether they have openly accessible social media profiles and established contact with those who did. For this, I have used a free trial version that allowed me to message individuals on LinkedIn, the design platform Behance as well as Facebook, Twitter and email. After reaching out to six people, three have responded and were keen to participate.

#	Name of Contributor	Type of Content	Platform	Their Original Content?	Related to 2019 Revolution	Uploader Identifiable/SM Profiles	Research/Type of Contact	Contacted	Response	Interview
1	A	Song/Cover	YouTube	No						
2	B	Song	YouTube	Yes	No					
3	C	Open Letter	TC Website	Yes (French)	Yes	No (too many of same name online it safely identify him)				
4	D	Electronic Music	YouTube	Yes	Yes	Yes	Email (found on his website)	Yes	No	
5	E	Poem	TC Website	Yes	Yes	Yes	Twitter/FB	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	F	Font	TC Website/Behance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Behance	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	G	Only Header/No Content	TC Website	Yes	Yes	No				
8	H	Open Letter	TC Website	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn	Yes	No	
9	I	Only Header/No Content	TC Website	Yes	Yes	No				
10	J	Only Header/No Content	TC Website	Yes	Yes	No				
11	K	Poem	TC Website + Link to his own	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	L	SM Handle/No Content	TC Website	?	?	No				
13	M	Only Header/No Content	TC Website	Yes (Arabic)	Yes	No				
14	N	Header/One Word	TC Website	Yes (Arabic)	Yes	No				
15	O	Only Header/No Content	TC Website	Yes (One word only)	Yes	No				
16	P	SM Handle/No Content	TC Website	?	?	No				
17	Q	Illustration	TC Website	?	?	No				
18	R	Electronic Music	YouTube	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn	Yes	No	

## Interview Sample

Overview of Interview Partners						
Sequence	Role	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation	Length in min
1/F1	Founder	F	27	London	Marketing Manager	75
2/F2	Founder	F	26	London	Business Developer & Partnerships	28
3/F3	Founder	M	25	London	Software Engineer	43
4/C1	Contributor	F	26	Abu Dhabi	Graphic Designer	65
5/C2	Contributor	M	56	Montreal	Business Developer / Published Writer	38
6/C3	Contributor	F	37	Beirut	Law Professional / Published Writer	104
1/E	Expert	M	35	London	Senior Journalist, focus: MENA, Lebanon	written

### Background Information on Sample

#### 1/F1 – Founder 1, 27, female

We had email contact prior to the interview. She is an architect by trade (studied at the American University of Beirut AUB), 27 years old and is currently residing in London, working for a construction start-up using AI. With her brother and her cousin, she founded the Thawra Chronicles as well as the social impact company Impact Lebanon. She is soon to leave London to pursue further studies in the US. She is French-Lebanese.

#### 2/F2 – Founder 2, 25, male

He is one of the co-founders, alongside his sister and cousin, of the Thawra Chronicles website, he is a trained software engineer and fully coded the website. Prior email contact. Furthermore, he co-founded Impact Lebanon and is currently residing in London. Working full-time as a software developer. He grew up in Beirut and left in 2015 to study in Canada, he has lived abroad ever since and wished to return. French-Lebanese.

#### 3/F3 – Founder 3, 26, female

One of the founding members of Impact Lebanon and the website Thawra Chronicles. Prior email contact. She's working full-time in a tech company and was in charge of design as well as marketing of TC. After postponing the interview multiple times, she found the time for a short, half-hour interview. It allowed me to go through my catalogue of questions while leaving her room for explanation but sadly not much room for further explanations or discussion. She was very forthcoming in her answers and even teared up a little

bit. Also holds American citizenship. Recalls being Lebanese as trying to find community everywhere, as well as looking for the best Lebanese yoghurt and other dishes wherever she goes.

**4/C1 – Contributor 1, 25, female**

Prior to this interview, I had a 10-minute Zoom call with her to get to know each other and to explain what the reason for my interview request was. She was initially slightly worried that she may not be “the right fit”, but quickly became very intrigued and wanted to participate. In said pre-chat, she disclosed that she is a graphic designer who left Lebanon to study in Florence, Italy, and just relocated to Abu Dhabi for her new work. She said she wanted to leave Lebanon to grow but is not unable to go back. Holds two masters degrees. Also Russian. Very proud of being Lebanese, patriotic and believes Lebanon is the best country to live and work, IF the conditions would be right.

**5/C2 – Contributor 2, 56, male**

Initial contact through LinkedIn, conversation through the platform. At the beginning of the interview, we had a brief get-to-know-each-other conversation, I asked if he had questions and clarified that he is free to stop the interview whenever. During the pre-chat, he established that he is a business developer who moved to Canada in the early 2000s due to his sexual orientation, he is furthermore a published poet and goes back to Lebanon yearly for a month or two. He has also published a book with his mother’s writing and his photography. He moved back to Lebanon for a few years between 2013 and 2016 but “couldn’t cope with it” as the situation hadn’t changed, he went back to Canada. Longs for Lebanese connections and moved within Canada to a place with a larger Lebanese community, states nostalgia as main driver for his writing. Also founder of an Immigrant Writers Circle.

**6/C3 – Contributor 3, 38, female**

Initial contact through Facebook, uses a pseudonym for her creative writing and has been published on 15+ blogs. Is a studied lawyer and works in the law profession, is back in Beirut but has lived abroad extensively for more than 15 years. Driver to leave was having to provide for family, younger siblings and her cancer-sick dad. Works with governance. Desire to make a change, public speaker. Family was part of the initial resistance against the French. Roots are: Turkish, Albanian, Moroccan, Phillipino, Spanish. Considered herself an activist until her best friend – founder of the Lebanese Civil Council – committed suicide.

**7/E1 – Expert, 35, male**

Contact provided through a course mate, senior journalist with specific expertise on Lebanon and the Middle East. Located in London, is also Lebanese. Work experience both in Lebanon and the UK.

## **Interview Request Form Example**

### **LinkedIn Message**

#### **Thawra Chronicles + Thesis on Lebanese Diaspora**

Dear XXX ,

I hope you're well and you don't mind me contacting you.

I'm Victoria, a Media and Communication masters student at Lund University in Sweden. I'm currently writing my thesis on the Lebanese (digital) diaspora and chose to use the website Thawra Chronicles as my case study.

While researching, I came across your contribution to the website and eventually found your LinkedIn profile.

I am reaching out to ask if you would be interested in participating in an interview as part of my thesis. Of course, this could be anonymized. I would love to get an insight into the why + how of participation but also how members of the Lebanese diaspora voice their contributions.

I'm just checking in if that would be something you would be interested in. I am planning to start the interviews in mid-March but could surely accommodate your schedule. The interviews shall last around 30–45 minutes.

Thank you so much for taking the time!

Please contact me should you have further questions. You can reach me via email, [victoriabecker144@gmail.com](mailto:victoriabecker144@gmail.com) or just respond here via LinkedIn Messenger

All the best,

Victoria Becker

## Consent Form



### INFORMED CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my thesis research. This consent form is necessary for me to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation.

This interview is being conducted by Victoria Becker, as part of her master's thesis in the subject of Media and Communication Studies, Department of Communication and Media, at Lund University, Sweden, under the supervision of Tobias Linné.

I do not anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Please read the accompanying information, then (electronically) sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- The interview will be recorded and transcribed
- The transcript will be analysed
- The recorded data will be stored safely without anybody able to access except Victoria Becker
- The transcript may be shared with supervisor Tobias Linné
- The recorded file will be destroyed after the submission of the thesis

#### Quotation Agreement (Please tick)



- I agree to be quoted directly.
- I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
- I agree that the researcher may publish documents that contain quotations by me.



By signing this form, I agree that

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project and am older than the age of 18. I understand that I do not have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time.
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.
3. I have received and understood the information provided prior to the interview.
4. I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality.
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

**Full Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Birth:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Information:**

Victoria Becker

Email: [victoriabecker144@gmail.com](mailto:victoriabecker144@gmail.com) or [vi8016be-s@student.lu.se](mailto:vi8016be-s@student.lu.se)

Phone: +49 176 800 90 663

## Appendix 3 – Interview Guides

### Founder Interview Guide

#### Intro

1. What is your relation to Lebanon? What does it mean to you?
2. You live in London. How do you (re-)connect to Lebanon?
3. By definition, you would be considered part of the Lebanese digital/virtual diaspora. Meaning people living outside of Lebanon who are connected digitally. Do you consider yourself that?
4. How do you self-identify in terms of nationality?
5. Do you consider yourself an activist?
6. How would you describe the “October Revolution”?

#### Thawra Chronicles (TC)

1. How would you describe TC to me?
2. Can you tell me a bit about your role in TC?
3. Can you tell me about the founding history in the context of “vetted news” as it is stated on the landing page?
4. What is the goal of Thawra Chronicles? What does it stand for?
5. Why did you create it the way it is? Participation, Pledges..?
6. In your text, you consistently use “we” and “they” suggesting a united feeling, together we stand strong? Why is that so?
  - a. How did you compile the content? The illustrations?
  - b. Who is your target audience?
  - c. What was the reception like? Who contributed? Did you get feedback?
  - d. Is there measurable impact of TC?
  - e. How is it funded? Is it a grass-roots movement?
  - f. Do you consider TC as being “activist”? Connected to other groups?
7. I came across it because I looked at the “October Revolution”. Would you consider it part of a bigger movement? A community?
8. Do you believe TC supported the “revolution”? How so?
9. Do you think that – in abstract ways – this gives people a feeling of hope, home and belonging? How so? How about yourself?

If there is time left:

1. There are voices saying that expatriates or diaspora members have too much influence in their “home countries”, on politics, economics. What do you feel about this?
2. How would you describe the media landscape of Lebanon?
3. Did you get any “hate mail”?
4. Do you believe the project served its purpose? How does the future look like for it?
5. In what way has TC/your activism “helped” you?
6. Would you like to say anything else?
7. Do you perhaps know any contributors who would like to speak with me?

## **Contributor Interview Guide**

### **Intro**

1. What is your relation to Lebanon? What does it mean to you?
  - a. Do you feel Lebanese? Strongly?
2. Where are you currently residing?
3. How do you (re-)connect to Lebanon?
  - a. Do you travel back?
  - b. Send any goods/money?
  - c. How do you keep in touch?
4. Do you consider Lebanon to be your homeland?
5. By definition, you would be considered part of the Lebanese digital diaspora. Meaning people living outside of Lebanon who are connected digitally. Do you consider yourself that?
6. How do you self-identify in terms of nationality?
7. Do you consider yourself an activist?
8. How would you describe the “October Revolution”?

### **Thawra Chronicles (TC)**

9. How did you learn about TC?
10. How would you describe TC to me? How do you understand it?
11. Can you tell me a bit about your contribution?
  - a. What made you contribute?
  - b. What did you contribute?
12. In what way has TC/your activism “helped” you?
13. What is, in your eyes, the goal of Thawra Chronicles?
14. Do you consider them doing important work for the “revolution” and the country?
15. Would you consider it part of a bigger movement?
16. Do you feel like you are part of a community created by TC?
17. Do you believe TC supported the “revolution”? How so?
18. Do you think that – in abstract ways – this gives people a feeling of hope, home and belonging? How so? How about yourself?
19. How do you place alternative outlets like this in contrast to mass media?
20. Did you also go protest offline?
21. Did you participate in other forms of activism/Lebanese groups on-/offline? How so? Why?

### **If there is time left:**

22. There are voices saying that expatriates or diaspora members have too much influence in their “home countries”, on politics, economics. What do you feel about this?
23. How would you describe the media landscape of Lebanon?
24. Do you believe the project served its purpose?
25. Would you like to say anything else?
26. Do you perhaps know any contributors who would like to speak with me?

## Expert Interview Guide

1. What is your relation to Lebanon? What does it mean to you?
2. Since when are you working with a focus on Lebanon & media?
  - What was the reason for you to start?
3. How would you describe the media landscape of Lebanon?
  - Which ones are the “main” channels?
  - Who is “playing” it?
  - Who are they catering to? Locals?
  - Is there media targeted at the diaspora?
4. Who is funding the media? Privat/public?
5. Lebanon is ranking on #102 on the RSF’s press freedom index. Would you consider the media landscape free?
6. How would you rate the level of trust the Lebanese citizens have towards “their” media?
7. Is Lebanese media informing its citizens acting along lines of “the fourth pillar of democracy”?
  - How would you describe their coverage of the “October Revolution” specifically?
  - Can you compare it to the coverage of the Arab Uprisings?
8. Do you think the media helps create unity? In what way?
9. The case of Lokman Slim made its rounds: What do you think this means for the future of the media landscape and the (local) journalists?

## Alternative Media & Diaspora

10. Do you believe the “October Revolution” has been broadcasted in a just way around the world?
11. What do you know about alternative media, contrasting the mainstream media in Lebanon?
  - Who is doing it? For whom?
12. I am looking at alternative media, an outlet to exchange and inform “from within”
  - Do you think this is valuable? Making an impact?
13. What is your expert opinion on the “meddling of the diaspora” in local contexts?
14. Can alternative media and “virtual” support such as Awareness Activism through Social Media and from the diaspora aid the situation on the ground?
15. I believe you consume Lebanese media. Which ones?
  - What are the differences/similarities that you see in contrast to UK/global media?
16. You are part of the diaspora, by definition. Do you consider yourself that, too?
  - How would you self-identify? Lebanese? British? Both?

## Appendix 4 – Interview Transcript Excerpt

### Interview Founder 2

**VB: Would you introduce yourself for me, please?**

SG: I'm Sibylle, I'm 27 and I'm originally an architect. I worked for two years in architecture and transitioned to [the] startup world a few years back. I work in a construction technology company, and we basically use AI in the construction world. In October 2019, I co-founded Impact Lebanon and I am currently a director there. I lead the marketing side and am very much included in the strategy exercise in general as a director and co founder. About the website [Thawra Chronicles], the way Impact in fact came together – we had different initiatives, this was one of them, the LebaneseRevolution/Thawra Chronicles website, it has been rebranded. We had different initiatives, some of them were more like “video awareness”. You know, videos that were meant to raise awareness about the situation in Lebanon, to Lebanese people abroad and people in Lebanon. Then we had that website as well, which was Lebanese Revolution 2019. I have to admit, we're not updating it at all anymore but it was what we were doing for a while.

VB: Thanks for the introduction. You said you live in London, right?

SG: I do.

VB: You lived in Lebanon before, obviously. If somebody would ask you where you're from, how would you answer that?

SG: In terms of where I'm from focusing on the characteristics of where I'm from, or how I moved, like, what do you want me to focus on?

VB: Would you introduce yourself as being Lebanese? Do you feel strongly Lebanese? Or what were the reasons for you to leave Lebanon?

SG: I do feel strongly about being Lebanese whenever someone asks about my identity. That's actually the first thing I say – even though I have two nationalities, I usually only mentioned the Lebanese one. And then if, you know, France comes up in the discussion, I add “Oh, and I'm also French” but it's not something I automatically identify with. The reason why I left, so I grew up in Lebanon my entire life. You have to understand that in Lebanon in general, we don't export anything, we import 80% of everything that we consume. The thing that Lebanon exports is its people.

Since you're born, it's kind of, I want to say a known thing, that there are expats [and] that you might be an expert and then eventually come back to Lebanon later on in your life to build your family, etc. But that was kind of my plan as well, [to] go outside of the country, learn as much as I could from abroad, and then come back eventually when I was 30, 35, something along these lines, and then build something in Lebanon.

I wanted to build my own company in Lebanon, that was my plan from the beginning. That's because in Lebanon opportunities, when you're very, very young are not that great, salaries are not amazing. If you really want to grow, there's that feeling and perception that you need to go abroad, in a way, if you have the means to do so obviously. Obviously, because I have a foreign passport – we call that foreign passport, meaning another passport than Lebanese one – then it's easier for me to leave in general.

So it was kind of a given that I would leave at some point to come back. But now unfortunately, with everything that unfolded, it's harder to come back because there's no economy anymore. There's not much, you know, to go back to. Even if we were to go back and actually build our own business, there are so many new constraints that we're not sure that it's actually going to be worth it in some ways.

VB: That's, that's really interesting. I had an interview with a girl who contributed to the website, and she was saying something very similar to that. She was hired in Abu Dhabi because she had a Russian passport, too, the Lebanese one would have not gotten her the job.

SG: Oh, wow.

VB: Since I'm researching the digital diaspora, I went into migration studies and tried to find out diaspora means, in terms of different migration flows etc. Would you consider yourself part of the digital diaspora?

SG: I think I would need to know what the digital diaspora is before [laughs].

VB: Fair point. So basically, members of the diaspora, expats in different countries, they connect virtually to friends and family or to the homeland. That's it, basically.

SG: Until recently, I would have said no, because I wouldn't admit that I was actually part of the Diaspora and I was an expat. So, I would see myself as actually someone in Lebanon, who went out temporarily in order to go back. But, I would say since I moved, since 2019, I would say yes. Since the revolution started and it became a bit clear that I would stay here for, let's say, a little while longer. Yes, I would say I do identify with the digital diaspora part.

VB: Would you consider yourself an activist with like, impact Lebanon and with the website? And what does it mean to you being an activist? And why do you do it?

SG: I would say a lot of people today are activists in the diaspora, especially after everything that happened. So, yes, I guess that I am, in some ways. Because being an activist is just anyone who, in my opinion, is doing any action to try to change this current status quo or raise awareness about what's going on in the country. I would say, it doesn't take a lot to be an activist, there's different levels of activism. Given that I dedicate a lot of my free time to Lebanon, I would say yes. It could be giving just one hour of your time and I would consider them activists, too, in my opinion.

VB: How much time do you actually invest in it? Can you say that?

SG: I'll need to think about it. It varies, obviously. So back in October [2019], it would have been about 10 hours a week. After August [2020], it was closer to 50. For a while, I actually dropped out of my job because at Impact Lebanon, we raised about \$9 million following the Beirut explosion. We had to scale quite a lot, our processes and our teams, and we grew quite a lot from maybe 50 to 300 members. So it was quite hectic. Today, I dedicate about 15 to 20 hours a week to Impact Lebanon as a director.

VB: That would be on top of your full time job?

SG: Yeah.

VB: Wow. That's really, really impressive. You guys mentioned before that you don't update the website as much anymore. But how would you describe the process? Why did you come up with it? I read on the side that you wanted to combat the "vetted" news? There's a lot of like "we" and "us". How did that come about?

SG: The revolution first started in 2019 and there were obviously a lot of emotions that came with it, and these emotions as expats. When it started, we were in London. It was a lot of happiness on one side, because we could see things moving. And we were like, okay, there's a lot of hope but then there was also a lot of sadness, in some ways, because we weren't part of it and we really wanted to be part of it.

But then, we started seeing a lot of news that were very negative about the movement or weren't, you know, describing it in the right way, there were a lot of fake news as well. Around us in the streets of London, we started seeing a lot of our colleagues, for example, that were confused about what was happening who were reading things that were not really accurate, etc.

Yeah, we didn't really like it. We really wanted to set things straight in order to ensure that this movement back home that we actually really cared for, was being pictured in the right way. So we decided to create that kind of database and archives where we would put all of the news and document all of this revolution so that people could go back and are able to trace back everything that happened reliably, and make sure that everything would be portrayed in the correct way. That was the original aim. We started doing it through a timeline, writing down the event. We partnered with different people who would know a bit more about it, professionals, we did a news repository. I worked quite a lot on that one.

There was an art database, showing of the art that came about. There were videos as well, because videos were actually quite a central point in this entire revolution. We would receive literally dozens of videos every day on our phones from our family or friends. We had groups that were dedicated to this revolution. WhatsApp groups in general.

This entire revolution was coordinated through WhatsApp groups, there were hundreds of them, I want to say. I'm not sure how many there were, but I know there were some in London, there were some coordinating the diaspora, there were some groups in Lebanon, there were some groups coordinating the groups of Lebanon, etc. It was mainly like a WhatsApp driven movement where a lot of people could [share] and some of these groups are still active. We still use the London one for instance to circulate some news etc. I think one thing that connects everyone within this groups is that we all want change.

As long as there's that connecting factor there, these groups might actually stay – I want to say so

VB: That makes sense. I can only imagine how it must feel that you see your home country being battered by so many different things and the accumulation of it is so horrendous that you go “okay, it's not a great time for me to go back. But what can I do?” I think it's really, really impressive what you guys are doing. You were three people who set up the websites, right?

SG: Yeah, there were other contributors, but we were mainly leading the strategy of it.

VB: You expressed really well what the goal of it was, what it stands for. I really found the part with the pledges, very fascinating. It's super informative with the timeline and the art – what art commemorates – and that people also have the option of pledging something. I was wondering how many people you reached? If there's any way of knowing that or how many contributions you've gotten? If you shared them all, or if you didn't share some?

SG: I'll need to check, I haven't checked in a while to be very honest. So, I wouldn't be able to tell you, I know that at first, we had quite a lot of traction, I just don't remember the numbers. But during the revolution, a lot of people were talking about it, the website, but then obviously, that started decreasing with time, especially when I became less diligent putting the news in. On my site, for instance, putting all the news in. I used to do it diligently every day

and then, after a while it wasn't sustainable for me anymore. I started doing it weekly, which means that it wasn't an instant kind of repository, it became a bit more of an archive, a documentation. I would say when that started happening, then it started to become a bit less.

We had a bit less views in general, in terms of pledges, we never hid pledges. Basically, they are all displayed on the website. It's instant, so anyone who puts in the pledge, it's going to be displayed automatically on the website. There's no filtering on that side. I can ask, but I guess you'll talked to Lucien, he's my brother, by the way.

VB: I figured, you've got the same last name.

SG: I live with him, I can ask because he developed it so he'll be able to tell you if there was any filtering, but I don't think there was [laughs].

VB: I was thinking also in terms of who's paying for it? What were the funds? I found some other projects, and I think they got money from a Lebanese ministry.

SG: No. It's our own funds. Right now, these funds get reimbursed by impact Lebanon, but because it became part of the broader organization so Impact Lebanon as an organization reimbursed us. It's mainly our own funds. The funds of impact around, if you're wondering, is crowdfund[ed] so people just donate because we're an NGO.

VB: I think that's really important [to clarify]. Because sometimes when I come across something that I think is independent and then you find out that some major company is funding them. I mean, it's probably obvious but would you consider it [the TC website] a grassroots movement that just became bigger? Set within the overall movement of the revolution?

LG: It's definitely a grassroots movement. This and all the other initiatives that started here in London We made it a point to keep it as a grassroots [movement] even till now. Even the way we operate now that we're a bigger organization, we try as much as possible to keep it grassroots in the sense that it doesn't never come from the top. It's not directors that impose vision or let's say projects onto the community, it's the community themselves. It acts as an incubator in a way you where people come up with ideas and then they are the ones shaping them, we just help them with different functions such as marketing, etc. About the [TC] website is definitely grassroots because I mean, it started with us, people started coming in and it stayed this way throughout. It did grow, it's merged basically with other initiatives to become Impact Lebanon.

I would say that right now we are kind of anchored very, very much in the revolution. It also depends what you mean by revolution today, because I think that today, there are different understandings on to what the revolution is. Unfortunately, from time to time it got a negative connotation as well.

VB: You also mentioned the fake news before, right? Did that mainly come from within Lebanese media? Or do you think it was more of a global phenomenon?

SG: No, it was global. There was obviously Lebanese media, some that were more biased and follow political parties, etc. But there's also global media and I think that came from a lack of understanding much more than, you know, like, being biased in some ways.

I remember [that] very often in international media would portrayed and label it as only the WhatsApp tax revolution. To us, that was very degrading in some ways, because the WhatsApp tax was kind of the cherry on top. The entire articles were not explaining all of the problems that came before that led to that WhatsApp tax. Whereas

people went onto the street, not only because of that tax, but because that tax represented so much more, actually. I think that the failing to represent that in an article and saying that people went onto the street only because of a \$6 tax was actually not correct. Giving it a label is another story, I guess they could do that if they wanted to. But it was the reason behind it that was, in my opinion, quite wrong and failed to depict the complete picture.

VB: I feel like that's a problem when people are speaking about you, and not with you. Or like, I'm aware that that's exactly what I'm doing in my whole thesis. But I'm trying to understand from and through you, it's so helpful. And I'm also talking to you, a Lebanese, BBC journalist, lives in London.

I was wondering if people give you feedback on the website? One of my research questions revolves around how people connect with the idea of a Motherland and how they build their identity when they are outside of Lebanon. I as a German person, in contrast, am not very proud, I know a lot of privilege comes with it but I don't care for my nationality much. The Lebanese people that I've come across so far, they're all fiercely proud with a mindset of "we are going to build back better".

SG: It's actually funny that you say that because I've always wondered the same thing is, why do we care so much? And I don't have an answer, it's a topic that I'm very interested in. Because, for example, you mentioned that you're German, and I'm sure your government provides much more than ours do. Ours doesn't provide anything, it's taking away from us. I've never understood why [people are so proud]. Despite that, or in spite of that, we actually care so much, you know? It's a bit weird.

VB: It's super emotional for sure. I would imagine and you're putting up a fight, you demand change and demand better things.

SG: It's just a small transition before I answer your question about feedback.

If I had to give a hypothesis on this, [I'd say it] is because your government gives you so much, you have the option to go back whenever you want. So, you're free to make your own decision. I would say that in our case, we don't have that option anymore. So, it's actually fighting to have that freedom to go back if we want to, going back to our families, etc.

To go back to the feedback part, we did get feedback. It would come from friends. Mainly, I would say, or people that we would meet here in London, so we would tell them, we're doing this website. And they would say, you know, you should do this. I personally never received feedback from other channels.

The website itself, I don't know if Raya did, she was in charge of the email in general. She might have. On my site, it was mostly getting feedback from people around me, word of mouth, stuff like this. And then we totally tried to apply the feedback in general to the website itself.

VB: When I'm done with all of this, I'm obviously going to share my work with you and the feedback that I've gotten from one contributor I've interviewed so far. She was super excited, she loved it, she was in her mid-20s and I'm going have another interview with a guy who lives in Montreal, and I think he is in his 40s, or 50s. I'm really curious what he's got to say.

SG: I'm curious to read that as well. I mean, later on, if I can read your thesis at some point. I'd love to see what people said about the website [laughs].

VB: Absolutely, that's not a problem at all. That's the least I can do.

SG: But to be very honest, I know, I keep on going on to Impact Lebanon because that's what we've grown into. So until now, we do receive a lot of feedback, about the fundraiser, for example, that we did. We try as much as possible to get feedback especially from the community of people working with us. That's actually feedback that we really care about, because that's what will make the organization even more active and sustainable, etc. We want to make sure to capture that feedback as well.

VB: The people that you work with, would they also be outside of Lebanon? Or are you very closely connected to people who live in Lebanon? How does that work?

SG: About you talking about the website or Impact?

VB: Both!

SG: [Regarding] the website, we were mostly in London because [of] the way we all met. I mean, Raya, Lucien and I are brother and sister and cousin, Raya is our cousin. But in general, the way we all met was through the protests here in London. All of us didn't actually know each other. All the cofounders of Impact Lebanon and all of the different initiatives, we didn't know each other before October [20]19. We had smaller groups and then we all met and created that organization. So no, the website, we were mostly based in London and the way we would find people were through these WhatsApp groups I was talking about.

During the October Revolution, we had different WhatsApp groups that emerged and the way it happened is [that] we would receive a link, sometimes you click on a link and you get redirected to Whatsapp group. That circulated in London, it was for the protest that were held here. Every one of us would get [invitations], our friends would send it "People in London sign up to this Whatsapp group". Obviously, most of them were saturated. I think we have about four Whatsapp groups right now that are full, so about 1000 people.

We would go through these WhatsApp groups where protests would be announced and we would go and protest altogether. Then we'd go back home that first day after the first protest. There were so many different protests, there was more or less one a week at first and then got a bit more spaced out. But after the first protest, there was a call on all of these four WhatsApp groups that was saying "we're launching that Slack channel for people who want to do initiatives for Lebanon".

That's actually when I joined. Raya and Lucien, we went on that Slack channel independently, actually, and we decided to build that website. Everything was centralized on that Slack channel and on these WhatsApp groups and this is how we all met one another. When we started working together on the website. The Thursday after that, so exactly a week after the revolution started, we decided to meet at someone's place. A random person, one of the people who like launched the WhatsApp group, she welcomed, I'd say, 15 people that she didn't know to her house and we started presenting all the different initiatives that we were talking about. This is how we centralized everything.

This girl would actually help [us] find people whenever we needed someone to help with the website. For example, if we needed someone to work on the art part, she would either know someone because she would be coordinating the resources or doing the town halls, etc. So, she would know people a bit more personally. Or we would post something on the WhatsApp group saying, "The website, Lebanese revolution 2019 is looking for someone who would help in XYZ; time commitment would be x hours per week, etc." People would come back to us, you know, reach out to this person and we would receive some applications, let's say some interest from people. There weren't really applications, it was more like, I want to help, okay, you are welcome to help.

This is how we grew. At first, it was mainly based in London and then gradually, it started expanding. Basically, the way it started, as I said, it was different WhatsApp groups and it was like a network. There were different, organised networks in different cities around the planet but the London one, let's say our chapter, was a bit more active and we had much more initiative than others. It started circulating that, we were active, we were doing initiatives, etc. and so we started to receive interest from other parts of the world. So, the website stayed quite London centric, but then, in fact, Lebanon itself started becoming much more international. And right now, we are extremely international with Impact Lebanon and we do have quite a lot of projects that are not London based at all.

VB: It sounds like such a big thing came out of connecting and meeting people. It really sounds like everybody involved is in there for.. hope?

SG: Hopefully [laughs]. So, yes, there is hope, but there is also realism that catches up from time to time. So, the good thing about being part of this community is that even when you do lose hope, there's always someone who would be here to lift you up. It did happen to a lot of people. You lose hope [and] you stop working for a while, you're like, okay, why am I doing this? Actually, it's very understandable, it's normal to have ups and downs.

But then the good thing with this community is that again, we help each other out, we trust each other. We understand that from time to time, there are these down moments, and no one would blame you for it, right? People are even happy to come and take work off your shoulder for a while so that you can take a break, rethink everything, etc. There's no judgment when it comes to this. Very often, we've had someone breaking down saying, "I don't know why we're doing this anymore. There's no hope." But then there's this entire community that's here to support you – very often by the end of the day or the call, that person is motivated again. I would say this is the power of having that community. One more point about the previous question, when you mentioned Lebanon: We do have Lebanese members but not as much as diaspora members.

VB: The community just seems to be so strong that it seems like a full-on movement maybe. In the whole aspect of you creating things, meeting others, the WhatsApp groups, the offline protests.

For me as an outsider, it just seems like a very tight knit, even family like, collective where people don't drop because they do it for the good cause. Even if you're burnt out at some point. It is wonderful to see people doing so many things. I came across one critique on diasporas, that members of the Diaspora who have been living outside of the country for a long time – they are part of the in-group of "the Lebanese", but because they are outside, that they are sort of also the "out-group" and that they try to influence the culture, politics, economics, etc. back at home. Is that something that you ever came across? That people were like what are you actually doing? You don't know what we are facing here?

SG: I think it's a valid question. Yes, of course, I would say in a way the diaspora is both. It would obviously depend as well on how much time you spent outside of Lebanon, how much time you spent in Lebanon, etc. But, I would say that, yes, we are out group and in group and obviously, I don't think that anyone can claim that we are exactly the same way as we would be in Lebanon. That's definitely not true. By going out [of Lebanon], you're one exposed to different other cultures, which means that you might have been influenced by other ways of thinking etc.

And so, obviously, you grew a bit apart, I want to say, from Lebanon in general. But that being said, in my opinion, there are obviously some disadvantages, but there's also some advantages about being in that out group. So it's not about saying "we think exactly the way people in Lebanon think", it's about saying "We *do* know [that] we have differences, let us help you actually understand why we think this way". I think this is also part of change, right?

To go back to our movement, some of us grew up in Lebanon. Some of us, though, never grew up in Lebanon, so they're completely detached, actually from Lebanon in general. They used to come back every summer to Lebanon,

but they haven't grown up there. So we do have both ways of thinking: We have the people who were in Lebanon, grew up in Lebanon, were really impregnated by that culture and people who maybe were not as much.

I think that this actually is an interesting mix, because then we're able to have very healthy discussions about all of this and we're able to actually take a step back – compared to people who are actually in Lebanon and are, unfortunately, so affected by the current crisis, that it is actually very hard for them to take a step back and actually understand what can be done.

Like, if you think about the upcoming elections, for example, I think it would be very understandable that anyone would accept money in order to vote again for the same people. I think it would be completely normal to do that because of the devaluation, because a lot of things, and no one can blame them for doing that. But that doesn't mean that they want the same people actually to come back to power, it just means that they actually really need that money. I think that this is something that we have the luxury to do, I want to say, when we are abroad. We're not as affected by that crisis, which means that – in a way – we can work on initiatives and dedicate free time for Lebanon to help the country and the people who are suffering back home as much as we can. In order to help and to raise awareness about all of these issues for change to happen, because I think that no one can deny that things are going wrong. If everything was going right, Lebanon would not be in that state. Now the question is, how do we start discussions? Or how do we encourage discussions in Lebanon and outside of Lebanon? And informed debates so that people start understanding and make more informed decisions?

We're not telling them “You need to vote for this person or this person”. What we're trying to do as an organization is more trying to help them understand the [political] landscape, for them to make a decision that's much more informed later on. That would benefit them according to their way of thinking. So not imposing something but rather helping to remove the fog on everything that's happening in Lebanon. Raising awareness in general, that is kind of the aim. I don't know if it makes sense.

VB: It really does make perfect sense. I read something about Lebanese people outside of Lebanon, that they had issues with voting, or that they weren't allowed to vote and that should be changed. Is that all smoke and mirrors?

SG: We can vote, Lebanese abroad are allowed to vote, obviously, if you have the Lebanese nationality. The thing is that information is not being spread in the right way in the sense that people don't know that they can vote, people don't know when they can vote, where they need to vote and how they can register to vote.

I think this is a trick thing [to] really raise awareness about your voting rights as a expatriate. This is actually one of our initiatives at Impact, because Impact is, again, a network of initiatives. One of them is about voting awareness and helping people to understand a bit more about that. Last year, if I'm not mistaken, 8% of the diaspora registered to vote and half of them actually voted. That's a very, very low turnaround.

Even in Lebanon, during the last elections only –I'm not sure if it's in Lebanon or worldwide – but I know that 49% of the population voted in the elections. 51% of the population did not give their opinion. That gives you an understanding, basically. So, the question is, why did these 51% not vote? Is it because they didn't understand what was there? Or was it because they didn't see anyone who would actually represent them? Was it because they lost hope? There are a lot of questions as to why people didn't cast a vote. I personally didn't, by the way, [in the] last elections, I didn't know who to vote for.

I didn't see anyone who would represent me. I didn't even know when deadline to vote was for me, I wasn't even interested, because I didn't see any change that would happen.

I had only been outside of the country for just a year. That gives you an idea [about] what the landscape is right now. This is why it's important to raise awareness. Going back to helping people make more informed decision, because

there's alternative parties, independent people who are coming about. Understanding what their political ambitions are. What is in their program? Up until now, there was no electoral program. People didn't say what they wanted to change in their country, their long term goals or short term goals. I don't think I've ever seen that for any political person.

So really, it's about raising awareness about this [by] telling people "No, you *can* actually make a difference and this is *why* you can make a difference." Raising awareness about how much one vote could impact the elections.

VB: Were you as political as you are now and were you an activist when you were still there?

SG: No. So, yes and no. Basically, when you're at school in Lebanon, you don't learn about Lebanese history.

VB: I read stuff about that. But keep going, I'm going to leave that question for later.

SG: You don't read about Lebanese history. The history books, I don't remember what year they end, but way before the Civil War. Way before, I mean, it probably ends in the 40s?

If your parents or family members, your friends don't really incite to read about it and if you don't read about it on your own, if you're not interested at first in Lebanese history, then there's not much you [would] know about it. Which means that you can't really be an activist, right? I was quite ignorant about Lebanese history when I was a kid, I didn't read much about it.

I'm still learning quite a lot to be very honest. I would say that this is one of the reasons why I actually didn't. The first time I actually went to what we call "Beirut West" was when I went to AUB. I don't know if you know a bit about Lebanese history, and you know about "Beirut East" and "Beirut West". It's basically Christian and Muslim [sides] very, very roughly speaking, Christian East and Muslim West. There was that a green line in downtown, there were snipers and you couldn't cross etc. It was [during the] Civil War, there were basically two different sides.

My family was in the East of Beirut and my mom never actually took me there [Beirut West], because she grew up during the war, for her, it's like the "other side" in some ways. She's still afraid to go there. Even now, when we go to the West, she tells me "Yes, whenever I cross back that line, I feel that sentiment of like, I'm home." I've never had that actually, I never had that feeling [of] I'm not home, I'm home when I go to the other part of the city.

But still, it's very segregated in the sense that some schools have a lot of people who come from different parts of Beirut. But in general, there are some schools that have a bit more people who come from the Beirut East and others from the West of Beirut which means that the first time I was actually really "mixed" with other people was at AUB.

It was actually when I was there that I started listening to other types of narratives and I started to become a bit more interested about Lebanese history. Even beyond that, [I became interested in] the Middle Easterners history, and I started reading about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, etc. This is when I actually started to be interested in it and that's when I started reading about it.

I would say this is when I started to become a bit more politically engaged. But I still wasn't totally aware of how much that was important, like during the election at AUB, I wasn't as engaged as I should have been. My assumption is that today, people at AUB, for example, are much more engaged in these elections. Just to give you an idea about elections in universities – I don't know if it's the same elsewhere, it's probably not – but you don't just vote for a representative. Your representatives are also from political parties. What we say in Lebanon actually, is that very often the results of the elections for that year, give you a pretty good understanding of the situation within the country.

This year, actually, after 2019, there was a secondary party that started emerging when I was there. A friend of mine is the co-founder of that party and he went on to found Megaphone after that, an independent news outlet. They're really good, you should research them.

He co-founded the Secular Club at AUB, which was a club advocating for secularism, non-sectarian parties, etc. It was the first party that was not linked to a certain sect. It's not a party, but it was the first movement in AUB that wasn't linked to a sect.

In 2019 was actually the first time where the secular party was starting to win most of the seats. With the Lebanese revolution, I think that all the candidates won the election. It's not only in AUB right now, it started spreading to other universities as well.

The political scene of Lebanon is very much based on clientelism. There's a leader of a community and that leader acts for the benefit of his community and not of the party. This is one of the reasons of why there's a lot of corruption, etc. And so, very often, because there's that clientelism structure, these warlords, these political leaders pay for the studies of their followers, children, etc, which means that all of these children that are in universities, are extremely dedicated to these political leaders.

This entire mechanism of recruiting people starts at university and that's why there's such a fuss about like these elections. It's because these elections are also a way for these leaders to assert their powers, to say "We're here, we're dominating, we're winning this year." There are actually some threats sometimes in universities – you have to vote for this party, your dad is with this guy, whatever. It's very, very politicized. It's very much anchored in the universities, the election and atmosphere in general. So this is why elections in universities are very, very important. I don't know if I went too much in detail.

VB: That's so interesting. Also the dependencies of "You pay for my education and in turn, I'm going to be your recruiter". As the people might be in the right demographic to recruit other people, especially in uni where people tend to become more political and more liberal even..

SG: It's not only education, it's also in jobs or in health. It's like we pay for your health, we provide you with a job, we ensure that you're going to have a job. Even, for example, in the American University of Beirut Medical Center. I know that there's a lot of positions that were very much linked to certain political parties, people they couldn't fire because they were linked to that political party. I know that a lot of the people who were fired recently, when there was that huge outrage, were actually a lot of these who were linked to certain political parties.

My family works there, they told me about it. They told me that a lot of them were actually people that AUB couldn't fire because they were linked to a party. This wave of people being fired was a chance for them to remove people who were not performing who were just here because of a link to a certain leader.

VB: That's so wild. Sorry for the lack of better word.

SG: [laughs] No, it is.

VB: Let's go back to the history. I came across another thesis dedicated to the "not shared history of Lebanon". That it's so fragmented and everybody has a different narrative. It basically, if I remember correctly, stops when Lebanon became independent. You have this mutual enemy from way back when but there is no working through history and reflecting, and then like putting all the pieces back together to create like a new whole.

I'm not sure if it's too far of a stretch but looking at like German history, especially like World War Two, and Denazification that was sort of imposed. We learn a lot about it at school, but obviously, we always learn it from the German perspective of how we screwed up big time. But I've never really learned it from other people's perspectives. I have a Polish friend and she tells me wildly different accounts then, like my French partner, for example.

I feel like we are being sort of trained to not be proud of who we are. Because God forbid, you would walk around with a flag, you get put straight into the right wing corner. Now, with COVID, and even prior to that, there's so much right wing extremism in Germany, in the police in the military, in the general population. It's "okay" to say things again, that like 10/15 years ago, people would be like, what is going on? Still now people are deflecting, "It was a one-off" [when right-wing motivated attacks happen]. There were lots of examples recently, for example somebody rampaged a synagogue and killed people. This is not a one off. There is this big split in the population.

And if you grew up without a shared history, how are you going to negotiate? I think it's super interesting that the party of your friend, or the group, gets so much traction, because I'm always wondering, is our generation more woke than our parents? Or do we reflect differently? Or is this like the problem of our times?

SG: Yeah. I just want to say it's not a stretch what you're saying, I think that you're completely right. One of the things I also have been saying is, history is usually written about certain events, and it can have different perspectives. But in general, it is roughly the perspective of the winners.

In our case, there was no perspective at all. Not the winners, not the losers, not whatever. It's like independent writers writing, and if you want to read it, read it. It's not official history. So, instead of acknowledging that there was a war, what happened in our case, is trying to just forget about it. It's just a feeling of it never happened. Even the positions, there was an amnesty law that was signed after the war, forgiving all of the war crimes to start on a blank slate.

Which can maybe help from time to time, I guess, if you want to, you know, because, yes, there is no denial that everyone in Lebanon had committed crimes. It was war time. I'm sure that people have committed atrocities, people might want to forget about them. You know, if you're in different states, you know, when you're at war, you don't live the same reality. I'm not trying to defend them. I'm just, trying to make sense of it.

My mom tells me about that different parallel reality, my dad as well because they lived it. But at the same time, my mom was constantly back and forth. My dad wanted to fight for example, in Lebanon – until my grandma discovered he was on a tank and sent him to Brussels. [laughs]

I hear these stories, but where I want to get at is [that] everything has been treated as "we want to forget about it". There is no commemoration, there's no memorial. There's this green line that I was talking about where snipers would be, there is now the downtown instead.

This downtown was constructed by Solidere [Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District] and I want to say, it's kind of an alien in Lebanon, right? It completely removed all of our history. It removed all of the old buildings, built new ones. People were forced to sell their houses, they got expropriated. Solidere, this company, basically alienated everyone.

Instead of having that space that alienated everyone, it should have been used as a space to bring people in, so that people from both sides would reconcile. I think the narrative that everyone used is just so wrong. It was just that act

of forgetting about it, instead of acknowledging that it existed and building on it to have a new nation, that never happened. I think this is actually where the biggest mistake was.

VB: From what I've learned so far, it seems like it's the biggest outcry in a really long time. Do you think it's founded in like this shared sentiment of everything you said before? That people want to reconcile? Or people want to overcome crony capitalism, clientelism and that they want to eradicate corruption and build a better Lebanon?

SG: I don't think that everyone has that shared [sentiment], you know? I mean, everyone feels exactly what I described previously, but I think that it's a consequence of it. I'm not saying that people want to have that shared understanding, some people do, obviously and it was reflected in the revolution movement, where people were saying "we don't want to say, I'm Muslim, first, I'm Christian first"

One of the asks of the revolution was, we want what people called technocrats in the government, which meant that they didn't want people based on their political affiliation or based on certain sect to rule the country. So, there is in a way, some of it that is inferred from it. You know, when we say, yeah, we want a government that is not made of these political leaders specifically.

But not everyone shares that feeling and you start seeing that when one of the leaders get attacked. So there's that common narrative at first that says, "we want dependent people". But then when, let's say, Saad Hariri gets removed from the government, there's a protest about know about Sunni in general, about Saad Hariri, etc. There are, I would say, two conflicting views; where we all – not all, but I would say most of the people – agree is on ending corruption and then clientelism. It's mainly about having competent people in power. I think this is something that we all agree on.

VB: The last census that was nearly, like 90 years ago, right? People now are sort of disputing how accurate it was, or [that] maybe some sects were "bolstered up" to get more seats in parliament. That it is so politicized that you basically can't really have another census, because people are so worried that the power balance that's existing now is going get absolutely destroyed.

SG: Yes, I think regardless of whether some sects have been boosted or not, I think there are no doubts that the distribution of sex *did* change within the country. I would say it's a double-edged sword in some ways, because we should have another census, obviously, because the population needs to be represented in the most realistic way.

But at the same time, if it's a change in power based on sects *again*, I think it might destroy the stability of the country in some ways. But I'm not sure how, obviously, we'll see.

I think it's interesting question, I don't have an answer to that one. Honestly, I don't know what to tell you. Because I think that both have downsides. But one of them is wrong, not doing a census is completely wrong. Right. It's crazy to think that there hasn't been a census for 90 years. I think that it was probably [a] biased census.

Let's say, there were some advantages of having more Christians. I don't know if it was actually boosted but I know that, obviously, the French would have benefited from having more Christian in the census. Now it's tbc, you know, how that would influence later on. I mean, it will also influence how external countries see Lebanon.

VB: You've helped me out a lot. It was super interesting to speak with you and to see where your motivations is coming from. So, thanks very much.

SG: No problem, of course. And if you want to contact any another organization, let me know. In general, I mean, you probably already saw that, but we are very much network based. let me know if you need anything else. I'm



# Appendix 5 – Coding Process Excerpts

02/09/2021 Founder Interview #1 - Rajay Kayat - Google Docs

02/09/2021 Founder Interview - Rajay Kayat - April 9<sup>th</sup>

18/04/2019

VB: Is one of the founding members of Impact Lebanon and the website Thawra Chronicles. She's working full-time in a tech company and was in charge of design as well as marketing of TC. After postponing the interview multiple times, she found the time for a short, half-hour interview. It allowed me to go through my catalogue of questions while leaving her room for explanation but sadly not much room for further explanations or discussion. She was very forthcoming in her answers and even teased up a little bit.

VB: Would you introduce yourself for me quickly?

RK: Absolutely, very nice to meet you. My name is Rajay and I'm based out of London. I am originally from Beirut, Lebanon, where I spend the majority of my life. I currently work in the partnerships team of a tech company in the UK and have been living in London for the past two and a half years.

I am also the co-founder of Impact Lebanon, which is a registered nonprofit in the UK, working on projects to make as much of an impact as possible on Lebanon, especially after the explosion of August 4. On a weekly basis, I work on partnerships as well with Impact Lebanon, so quite a busy time and busy weeks.

VB: It does sound very busy. What does being Lebanese mean to you being outside of Lebanon?

RK: I feel like even though I've lived outside of Lebanon since 2015, my heart is still there every day. Like it's a feeling that I can't really explain - being Lebanese means that you have Lebanese people or family wherever they are. Like, if I went to the far west in the US and California and you'd meet Lebanese, we would automatically just come together just because of the community that we are. For me being Lebanese is being able to recognize accents wherever I go. It's to be happy when I see Lebanese etc. but they connect digitally. Based on the website Thawra Chronicles, which is my case study, I believe you do belong to that group. But would you consider yourself being part of that group?

VB: Absolutely. I mean, most of my friends don't live in Lebanon anymore, we all left to find a better opportunity because of the current corruption and the financial crisis. It just is impossible to sustain a healthy lifestyle [make] a sustainable salary and to be able to bring up a family under those current conditions. That's also why I mentioned the community because everyone left, they stay migrants, because they had to basically, because they had no other choice. It's nice to connect with people that share the same experience.

VB: You said the idea was born out of frustration with the news, right? Who would you say your target audience is?

RK: Initially, the target audience, I keep referring to the hashtag #aboutLebanon because people started talking a lot about the country after the explosion because they were able to see it. But you know, we're such a teeny tiny country, people don't know where we are on the map. The number of people who thought I was from Lebanon, Tennessee in the US, they just don't know.

My target audience, initially, in my mind, was the international community, not Lebanese (but international). Especially the young, I would say (those) in their 20s, 30s and 40s who can help raise awareness, who can donate if need be, create an interest and to shed some light on what was happening. That was the main audience.

Then a sub audience would obviously be the Lebanese people who are not that involved and can get involved. That's what we're doing with Impact Lebanon. The third audience is actually all Lebanese to keep them motivated to continue the revolution and their work. So, I think literally everyone.

VB: From looking at the pledges, I would assume that the people who have contributed are Lebanese or connected to Lebanon in some sense, because why would somebody else pledge something to Lebanon? In all fast, there is constant use of the words "we" and "they", suggesting a feeling of unity. And "we stand strong together". Being a total outsider, what I've learned about Lebanon, is that it's very heterogeneous. So I'm asking, where is this unity coming from? Or what is the aim behind it?

RK: For the longest time, Lebanon was divided into different groups, political groups, and that has divided the country. You have the Christians and within the Christian, you have different political groups, you have the Muslims, Sunnis, Shia. Historically, we were a sectarian regime, it's divided into sects. But for the first time ever, I mean, since I was born, I could see people just coming together towards a united enemy, if you want, which was the whole regime. Just because of how bad it got and how bad it is.

People don't really rely on their political leaders anymore. It's really the people against the regime. That's really the feeling that we felt in October of 2019 [and] after the explosion. It's really the frustration and just despair and people revolting against them. That's where the "we" comes from.

VB: Would you introduce yourself for me quickly?

RK: It's a good question. I lean towards expats. Because diaspora, I mean, I love the name, but for me, it means a group of people outside of their country. Expats for me is - they had to leave the country, it led to having a diaspora. But we didn't have a choice, we only had the choice of being expats. Does that make sense?

VB: I do. I do Media Studies, I'm not in migration studies but I've been trying to figure out what would be the right term to use. Because you have migration flows and I found that predominantly Western people living outside of their countries, they would be classified expats, but not immigrants. There are all types of notions around it, but like, there's no right and wrong as far as I know now.

Anyway, because you do the Thawra Chronicles - or have done so in the past - and you've done this fundamental fundraiser with Impact Lebanon, do you consider yourself an activist?

RK: [chuckles] It's funny, I laugh because I've asked my question the same question many times. I think the way I define activists is someone that is passionate about a cause and pushes to reach whatever goals they have for that cause at every cost.

I would say I'm so passionate about Lebanon, the fact that I have my day-to-day job and I am trying to have a life outside, I wouldn't be a full-time activist. But I'm definitely a part time activist [laughs]

VB: What I've learned about you, Sybilie and Lucien, I would say you're more than full time activists, I've been so impressed by everybody I've spoke to so far, it's really amazing. Anyway, how would you describe the Thawra Chronicles to me and could you tell me a little bit more about your role in it?

RK: [teary voice] It's funny, I'm actually tearing up because the fact that you're using this for your thesis means that the work that we did. So the revolution started in October of 2019, as you know. Immediately, especially for people in Lebanon, we were so keen on doing something to help because we felt so powerless. You know, we had our family and friends back home, just marching in the Martyrs' Square and protesting - and I was standing in my London flat, enjoying the weather. I was like, this is not ideal.

VB: There's no choice, I'm not an activist by choice, I'm not pushed by anybody, I've never really thought about it in that way but I would say I'm a part time activist, but my heart has always been with Lebanon and trying to push for it.

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18/04/2019

1 Founder Interview - Rajay Kayat - April 9<sup>th</sup>

aggregation + highlighting of revolt practices

I think my way was to try to aggregate everything and make sure it was correctly relayed. But someone can write a song about it and people observe to hear it, someone can draw incredible graffiti or paint a beautiful picture - there are a lot of ways to express your feelings and see ways to reach people. The goal really was to highlight it, I think we've done a good job but it could be much better if we had time and the resources. If we were a full time company, I can tell you, this would be a very different page, but at least it shows a snippet of what has been done.

VB: You said the idea was born out of frustration with the news, right? Who would you say your target audience is?

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Founder Interview #1			
Descriptive Codes	Code Number	Analytical codes	Code Number
Currently living abroad	1	Lebanese Identity	
Born and raised in Lebanon	2		
Has family and friends in Lebanon	3		
Wants to go back to Lebanon	4		
Sees Lebanon as home	5		
	6		
	7		
27 years old			
Architect by training			
Transitioned to start up world			
Lives in London			
Co-founder of TC and IL			
Says she does Marketing + Strategy at IL			
Says TC an initiative of IL			
Says IL has initiatives to raise awareness about Lebanon for Lebanese people abroad/inside			
Says they are not updating TC anymore			
Feels strongly about being Lebanese			
Has two nationalities / foreign passport			
Doesn't automatically identify with French/second nationality			
Grew up in Lebanon their entire life			
Says it's common knowledge that there are expats and you may become one to come back to Lebanon later in life to build your family			
Says her plan was to leave, learn as much as possible from abroad and then come back to Lebanon to build something there			
Wanted to build her own company in Lebanon			
says opportunities/salaries in Lebanon are not great when you are young			
Says that if you want to grow there is a feeling + perception that you have to go abroad if means allow it			
Says foreign passport makes it easier for her to leave in general			
Says it was a given that she would leave at some point to come back			
Says now it's harder to come back because there is no economy anymore			
Says that there is not much to go back to			
Says that there are so many new constraints, she is unsure if it's worth it to go back and build own business			
Says that until recently she wouldn't admit she was part of the diaspora			
Says that she saw herself as an expat			
Says that she saw herself as actually someone in Lebanon who went out temporarily in order to go back			
Says that since she moved in 2019 and after the revolution started it became clear that she will stay longer she identifies with the digital diaspora part			
Says a lot of people today are activists in the diaspora especially after everything that happened			
Says that she is an activist in some ways			
Defines an activist as someone who is doing any action to change the current status quo or raise awareness about what is going on in the country			
Says that it doesn't take a lot to be an activist			
Says that there are different levels of activism			
Says she is an activist given that she dedicates a lot of her free time to Lebanon			
Says that she would consider people activists who give just one hour of their time			
Says that in October 2019, she invested about 10h/week			
Says that after August 2020, it was closer to 50h/week			
Says that she dropped her full-time job for a while because of her activism			
Says that Impact Lebanon raised about USD 9 million following the Beirut blast			
Says that they had to scale processes and the team a lot			
Says that they grew from 50 to 300 members			
Says that time was quite hectic			
Says that today she dedicates about 15-20h a week to IL as a director on top of her full-time job			
Says that a lot of emotions came with the start of the revolution being an expat			
Says that there was a lot of happiness because she could see things moving, sadness because she wasn't part of it			
Says she really wanted to be part of the revolution			
Says at some point she started seeing lots of very negative news about the movement			
Says that the news weren't describing it in the right way			
Mentions a lot of fake news circulated about the revolution			
Says she started seeing a lot of colleagues being confused about what was happening			
Says those colleagues were reading things that weren't really accurate			
Expresses she didn't really like the revolution was portrayed wrongly			
Says that she wanted to set things straight to ensure the movement back home was pictured in the right way			
Says that she really cared about that movement back home			
Says that wrong depiction of revolution was the reason to create that kind of database and archives to put all of the news and document the revolution			
Says that the original aim was to create TC so people can go back and are able to trace everything back reliably + everything would be portrayed in the correct way			
Says that it started with a timeline, writing down the event			
Says that they partnered with different professionals to create the news repository			
Says that she worked quite a lot on that news repository			
Talks about the art database showing art that came about, videos, too			
Says that videos played quite a central point in this entire revolution			
Says that they would receive literally dozens of videos every day on their phones from friends and family			
Says that there were groups dedicated to the revolution			
Says that WhatsApp groups in general played an important role			
Says that the entire revolution was coordinated through WhatsApp groups			
Says that there were hundreds of them			
Says that there were some in London			
Says that there were some coordinating the diaspora			
Says that there were some groups in Lebanon			
Says that there were some groups coordinating the groups of Lebanon			
Says that it was mainly a WhatsApp driven movement			
Says that a lot of people could share information			
Says that some groups are still active			
Says that they still use the London one to circulate news			
Thinks that the thing connecting everyone within the groups is that they all want change			
Thinks that as long as there is that connecting factor there, those groups may actually stay			
Notes that there were other contributors to TC but that the three were mainly leading the strategy			

## Appendix 6 – Themes Excerpt

Theme	Category	Subcategories
<b>Identity</b>	<b>Lebanese Cultural Identity</b>	Strong expression of feeling Lebanese even though dual citizenship
		Born and raised in Lebanon
		Pride of being Lebanese
		Strong attachment to culture, place, traditions
	<b>Diaspora Identity</b>	Migration experience
		Desire to return to country of origin
		Inability to return
		Transnational bonds
		Strong emotional ties (anger, frustration, hope)
	<b>Homeland Engagement</b>	<b>Offline</b>
Connecting with other Lebanese		
<b>Online</b>		Relationship maintenance with friends/family
		Consumption of homeland media/news
<b>Political Interest in Lebanon</b>		No prior interest
		Slight prior interest
<b>(Online) Mobilisation</b>		<b>Revolution as Trigger</b>
	<b>Strong Emotional Response</b>	Discontent with situation in Lebanon
		Discontent with media coverage
		Feelings of being away/unable to participate

	<b>Political Interest</b>	No prior interest
		Prior interest
	<b>Level of Engagement/Participation</b>	Consumption/Contribution
		Founding
	<b>Digital Activism</b>	Desire to contribute to change-making
	<b>Exercising Opportunity</b>	Affordances of the Internet
		Easy participation/Low cost
		Open opportunity structure in country of residence
		Freedom of Expression
<b>Deploying professional skill</b>		
<b>Voluntary endeavour</b>	"Donating time"	
<b>Artistic Expression</b>	Sense-making through art	
<b>Alternative Media as a Tool</b>	<b>Moderate/Peaceful</b>	Low-risk
	<b>Roles of Website</b>	Narrative Control/Counter-Narrative
		Awareness Raising
		Bringing people together
		Exercise of agency
		Educational Resource
		Information Brokerage
		Space to vent/show solidarity anonymously
	<b>Different target audiences</b>	Different sub-sites/roles

<b>Media Practices in Crisis</b>	<b>Use of multiple online resources</b>	
	<b>Lack of Trust/Discontent</b>	Discontent with media coverage of revolution
		Lack of trust in Lebanese media system
	<b>Reflection of Repercussions</b>	Reflection about possible repercussions if connected to TC
		No reflection of repercussion

### Appendix 7 – Thawra Chronicles User Statistic

