

If Knowledge is Power, Communication is Empowerment

At this very moment, you are actively participating in a process of communication. By reading this Editorial, you interact with one of the many different types of media available in contemporary Lebanon. No matter where we live, the communications media constitute a powerful force in our lives. As a means of socialization, the media are as influential as the family and the schools in shaping who we are and what we think, value, need, fear and do. Our daily exposure to print and electronic media provides us with our unspoken (and usually unexamined) assumptions about what is desirable and possible in our lives as individuals and as members of a society. The media play a crucial role in shaping our awareness of gender roles and our conceptions (too often unquestioned) of the "proper" qualities and characteristics of men and women. As a source of news and information, the media shape our sense of our rights and responsibilities as citizens and enable us to prioritize national challenges and goals. Ideally, the media should enable each of us to participate in the formation of a public consensus about the aims of social development and governmental policies. Through active participation in processes of communication, each person, whether male or female, young or old, rich or poor, Muslim or Christian, should be able to analyze, question and influence the social, political, economic and environmental world in which he or she lives. For a variety of reasons, however, this ideal is seldom realized in any contemporary society.

In an effort to understand how the media shape our sense of self and our view of our nation and society, and in the interests of understanding how the media can be used to empower individuals to make a positive impact on their shared world, the File section of this issue of *Al-Raida* addresses the multi-faceted topic of "Women, the Media and Sustainable Human Development in Lebanon." Often, when feminist scholars and journalists address the topic of women and the media, they focus primarily upon the narrow issue of negative media portrayals of women as sex objects or mindless creatures subordinate to the whims of men. Certainly, demeaning and degrading presentations of women in the media should be criticized and condemned; such portrayals can only serve to perpetuate disrespectful attitudes and behaviors which humiliate, violate and damage women and girls. In this issue, we critically examine the portrayal of women in Arabic-language women's magazines (see the research article by Dr. Eid, page 26). However, we also expand our focus to address the roles that women play in the decision-making processes of various Lebanese media institutions (print and electronic), as well as to survey the actual and potential role of the media in fostering sustainable human development projects and processes of democratization.

Women's role in and impact upon the Lebanese media are matters of increasing significance. According to the Report of the Lebanese National Committee prepared for last year's International Women's Conference in Beijing, 80 percent of all college students pursuing degrees in media and communications in Lebanon are women. What

future awaits them as media professionals? How will their attitudes, concerns and priorities shape Lebanese media productions in the coming decades? Will women journalists and television producers, more so than their male counterparts, address the complex social, economic and educational forces impacting upon the Lebanese family, and thus, upon the Lebanese nation? The File section of this issue of *Al-Raida* represents the first stage of a long-term research project designed by sociological researcher Irene Loring to find objective answers to these important questions.

The interrelated topics of social and economic development and the media have recently become matters of controversy and public concern in Lebanon. We hope that this issue of *Al-Raida* will be a timely contribution to the ongoing debate about Lebanon's institutional restructuring and the achievement of just and equitable socio-economic development in the Second Lebanese Republic. We hope that the articles, reports and interviews in the File section inject some needed thoughtfulness, civility and constructiveness into the current debate.

Communication, like charity, begins at home. Effective communication is the responsibility of each individual, whether citizen, parliamentarian or minister. After sixteen years of war, during which constructive debate and dialogue were silenced by the deafening roar of shelling and shooting, it is imperative that each person in Lebanon develop his or her abilities to communicate in a constructive and non-violent manner. In an era of such technological advancements as cellular telephones, E-Mail and the "World Wide Web," it is easy to forget that the most basic medium of communication is speech. Through face-to-face dialogue, individuals can make or break their society. If our speech is not rooted in rational thought, respectful values and constructive attitudes of justice, fairness and tolerance, we will never progress as individuals or as a nation. If we refuse to listen actively and cooperate creatively with the other because "she is a woman" or "he is a young person" or "they are from a different sectarian background than us", then we are limiting our individual and collective potentialities and undermining the very basis of our society and nation. The following Opinion column by AUB Graduate Student Rana Idlbi makes this point eloquently.

The experiences, knowledge, ideas and skills we each possess as individuals become a precious communal resource by being shared through communication. The media which facilitate such sharing among and between individuals must be respected, protected and nurtured. Considering the extent of the damage inflicted on Lebanon by the long and senseless war, the creative use of every medium of communication will be required in order to rebuild this wounded but promising country, mind by mind, heart by heart, citizen by citizen, regardless of age, gender or confessional background.

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