

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## A City by the Sea: Uncovering Beirut's Media Waste

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*What kinds of social, cultural, and political narratives emerge when we pay attention to how media are physically rendered as trash? By reducing media to their material forms and tracing their journey from use to disuse, the stories behind media activism start to appear. This article studies where Beirut's media waste goes and who brings it there. A women-only beach, a refugee camp from the early 20th century, and some of the most vulnerable populations in Lebanon all exist alongside Beirut's trash. They are part of the story of media in the Arab world because media are waste. While media activism in the Arab world is often marked by the visibility of bodies in protest, media waste in Lebanon is governed by a politics of invisibility that covers and hides the very social problems that media activism seeks to address.*

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In July 2015 the Naameh Landfill shut down. In almost 20 years of operation, it serviced greater Mount Lebanon and the country's capital, Beirut. By 2014, there was no space left in the landfill, and garbage spilled dangerously out of control. Residents of the nearby town Ain Darfil eventually blockaded the road leading to the dump, demanding that the government make right on its promise to shut down the garbage site. This victory for the poor community in the south of the country was to the detriment of residents of Beirut, whose city ballooned with trash. With no backup plan in place, piles of garbage collected in dumpsters and on streets, overtaking the city and becoming a visible reminder of the country's waste problem.

Then something of a media miracle happened. The city's residents—confronted with government corruption and inefficiency in the most visceral way—used social media platforms to mobilize street demonstrations between July 2015 and March 2016. They protested how the government was handling the trash crisis and lashed

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out at government corruption more generally. As [Geha \(2019\)](#) has shown, the garbage crisis mobilized some first-timers but also joined existing activist networks—including leftist activists, civil society advocates, and grassroots organizers—under a single banner. Not all of these networks were explicitly interested in the garbage crisis, but they shared the movement's critique of the political elite. The hashtag #YouStink or #طلعت\_ريحتكن in Arabic, which addressed the country's politicians directly, became a rallying call that united efforts across different platforms and gave virtual body to the You Stink Movement.

The movement and its protests also challenged the way that news reporting typically works in Lebanon. As scholars (e.g., [Dajani, 2013](#)) have noted, the country's television networks participate in the dominant sectarian political system, with many TV channels explicitly tied to political parties. However, the You Stink protests—which indicted the entire political system—confounded a media system that was built on the back of politics as usual. Some stations refused to show the protests at all, including the Hezbollah outlet Al-Manar and the Future Movement-affiliated Future TV. Other channels only began covering the protests once they became violent. These channels—including OTV and NBN, affiliated with the president's and the speaker of parliament's political parties respectively—highlighted the violence in order to condemn the protests, going so far as to blame rival political parties and foreign interference.

At a moment when the old order sought to downplay or undermine the protests, the politically-unaffiliated station Al-Jadeed sided with the protestors, even advocating for them in foreign news outlets. At the height of the protests, it devoted most of its airtime to covering the movement, refusing to otherwise cover political life in the country. For Al-Jadeed, the only newsworthy events in the country were the You Stink protests. Its coverage celebrated the protestors, calling the movement a revolution. According to Al-Jadeed Vice President Karma Khayyat, this was the first time that the station so explicitly sided with a political movement ([Al Jazeera, 2016](#)). The entire Lebanese media ecology seemed to be shifting, and all media were implicated, not just the social media platforms that protestors had used to organize their activities.

In February 2016, the You Stink Movement released a parody of a recent promotional video by the Ministry of Tourism that displayed Lebanon's natural beauty. The You Stink Movement's version featured sweeping drone footage of the long stretches of trash destroying Lebanon's environment. Images of quintessential tourist activities were replaced with the drone footage, as ski slopes suddenly became mountains of trash bags and seaside views gave way to rivers of garbage. This was an important corrective to the image of Lebanon as a place of endless beauty and comfort. Journalist Habib [Battah \(2016\)](#) described the battle over images as a "war of drones" (para. 1). This designation captured how the creative output of the You Stink Movement challenged state power, as views, likes, and shares became the spoils of a new kind of warfare. The video was picked up by media outlets like CNN and circulated globally. Meanwhile, the state's increasingly violent reaction to

peaceful You Stink protests captured the attention of the international press. The world seemed to be watching, and—with a range of media technologies as their weapons—the people were winning.

By March 2016 the government had acknowledged how untenable the situation had become and enacted a number of changes that responded to the movement's demands, including releasing federal funds to the country's municipalities and opening two new landfill sites to service Beirut, both on the edge of the city, in suburbs Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud. In mid-March 2016, the city's waste management company began relieving Beirut of its garbage problem, removing piles of trash from the streets and bringing them to the two nearby dump sites. Having successfully raised awareness of the garbage crisis in Lebanon, the You Stink Movement ceased its on-ground operations. Beirut didn't stink anymore, and the movement had led to significant changes, even if the government's concessions had hardly solved the longstanding waste crisis.

Media scholars heralded the You Stink Movement and its use of digital platforms. This movement stood out in part because Lebanon's young citizens had previously been disregarded as politically apathetic, and You Stink showed their engagement with the country's political problems. The movement also managed to cross the sectarian divides that usually define political life in Lebanon (Khalil, 2017; Kraidy, 2016b). Scholars and journalists agreed that the You Stink Movement was Lebanon's turn at the Arab Spring protests that swept the region beginning in 2011 (e.g., Beck, 2015; Khalil, 2017; Kraidy, 2016b).

The scholarship on You Stink in Lebanon is consistent with a larger pattern of studying media in the Arab world. In much of the scholarship on Arab media, emphasis is on media as sites of resistance or as spaces for public debate (e.g., Kraidy, 2016a; Zayani, 2015). The growing scholarship on Arab media emphasizes the social uses of media and in the process occasionally replicates the utopic message trumpeted by Silicon Valley about how digital media platforms are inherently democratic spaces (Levina, 2017). This strand of scholarship became especially strong in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011, which were touted in both scholarly and popular sources as a "Twitter Revolution." When scholars and journalists likened the You Stink Movement in Lebanon to the Arab Spring uprisings years earlier, the level of political engagement seemed familiar but so too did the use of digital media platforms. Optimistic accounts of Arab media have become central to the field. But the story of media in the Arab world does not always smell like roses, and what the literature has not yet acknowledged is how media also burden people and environments.

The scholarship on the You Stink Movement specifically overlooks the fact that media are indistinguishable from the waste problem in Lebanon. Media are not just a way to protest the garbage crisis; media are waste. Such a claim requires that we acknowledge the material forms that allow for digital activism: glass screens, plastic keys, electric motherboards, and toxic battery liquid. The material burdens of media are serious in Lebanon, where there are no recycling facilities for electronic waste.

As a result, no protocol exists for responsibly discarding old and unwanted media technologies. A country report from 2014 has “no information” listed for all of the sections pertaining to e-waste. Instead, it refers readers to a organization called Beatoona, which collected electronic waste in Lebanon and shipped it to France (Sweep Net, 2014). This is consistent with a larger pattern in Lebanon. The lack of public services has meant the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social entrepreneurs that step in where the central government has not. Recycling in Beirut, for example, falls to a growing list of NGOs and small businesses, including Arc en Ciel, Recycle Beirut, and the Zero Waste Act.<sup>1</sup>

The deferment of public services to NGOs and small businesses often translates into the disruption of those services. For example, Beatoona, the organization that dealt with e-waste in Lebanon, no longer exists. The fragmented and inconsistent nature of recycling services means that people do not know when or how to access them. In the absence of an infrastructure for disposing of electronic waste, it is not uncommon to see discarded media technologies lying in the streets of Beirut (Figure 1). Statistics reveal that about 50% of waste in Lebanon is organic. The remaining half comprises categories under which media waste might fall, including plastic, metal, glass, and paper (Sweep Net, 2014). This is not to say that half of waste in Lebanon comes directly from media technologies but rather to show that that materiality of media has become intertwined with the very composition of trash.

Thus, the story of media in Lebanon is also the story of waste. My claim here is not entirely unique. Other scholars, too, have begun exploring the intersection of media and waste. Maxwell and Miller (2012) forged a new field when they asked media scholars to acknowledge the environmental destruction caused by media technologies, from the telegraph to the Internet. Maxwell and Miller understand the lack of scholarly attention to the materiality of media technologies through the polarized nature of media studies, where “a cult of humanism” and “a cult of the scientism” dominate research agendas (2012, p. 11). Humanistic research on media and the environment has largely focused on questions of representation, while social-scientific scholarship has attended primarily to the efficacy of environmental communication. The chasm between these two camps has created blind spots, including critical accounts of “media tech as an environmental and biophysical force” (Maxwell and Miller, quoted in Kooijan, 2013, para. 4).

In order to overcome the limited research agendas set by the “cults” in media studies, Maxwell and Miller (2012) advocate for a materialist approach that heeds “Max Weber’s insistence that we understand technology as a ‘mode of processing material goods’” (p. 21). In tandem with Maxwell and Miller’s empirical work, media theorists such as Cubitt (2016), Parikka (2015), Peters (2015) have offered philosophical accounts of how media and the environment are indistinguishable from one another. These works begin to demarcate a form of media scholarship that demands that we acknowledge not just how media technologies represent or



**Figure 1** An old, discarded computer monitor in Beirut. Such sights are common and are reminders of the lack of infrastructure for disposing of media waste in Lebanon. Photograph by the author.

advocate for the environment but also how those technologies are inextricably bound to the natural world.

With this imperative in mind, scholars have examined a number of ways in which media intersect with waste specifically, exploring everything from how entertainment industries model their distribution practices after waste management processes to how Silicon Valley functions as a site of tremendous waste production to the ways in which television shows linger on toxic imagery in order to critique industrial pollution (e.g., Gabrys, 2013; Herbert, 2016; Kelly, 2017). Media infrastructure scholars have also shown how the material and technological conditions of media distribution—from satellite dishes to fiber optic cables—affect and are affected by natural environments and their adjacent communities around the world (e.g., Starosielski, 2015). Together these studies counter the idea that digital technologies are any less material or any more sustainable than any other kind of technology. In Lebanon, the ongoing waste crisis makes this line of inquiry between media and waste especially urgent, and it opens up new avenues for studying what media accomplish in the Arab world more generally.

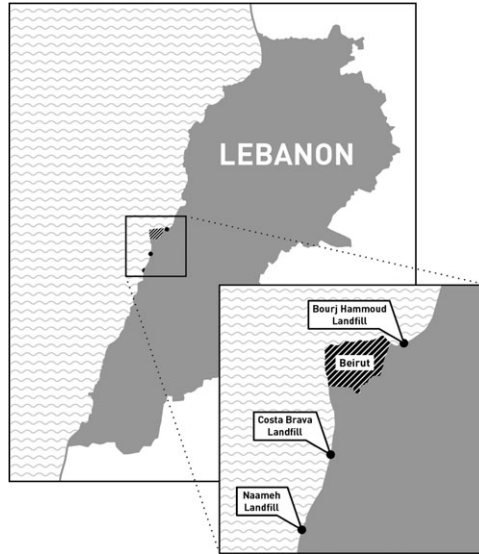
By tracing media waste in Lebanon, we can see how media play a role in demarcating the edges of political participation. Media do not just empower communities; they also burden them. The You Stink Movement in Lebanon was very much centered in Beirut, and although its successes were many, the movement itself was not accessible to everyone. The government's response to create two new landfills relocated the problem of waste to the outskirts of Beirut, where residents and activists did not have the resources to continue the resistance that had defined the You Stink Movement when trash covered the streets of the city's center. Similarly, the labor force that performs waste disposal in Beirut mostly consists of foreign workers, who live with very few rights in Lebanon. The You Stink Movement shows how Beirut's young residents used communication technologies in order to come together in

protest, but it also revealed their anxieties about being confronted with the waste they produce. Scholarship on media in the Arab world needs to account for media waste in order to acknowledge the boundaries of what is actually being studied. While the way in which people use technologies has inspired generations of media and technology scholars, how do we begin the work of theorizing the disuse of media as a social and cultural phenomenon?

In what follows, I look to the edges of Beirut in order to see where media waste goes and who brings it there. I understand the edge to be a periphery that is tied to its center through exchange and labor. This is a spatial relationship that exists in the flows of uneven power. The periphery serves the center, and never the other way around. In the case of Beirut's media waste, two landfills are located right outside of the city's limits, and trash moves from within the city to its outskirts. The very uses of media that excite and inspire us eventually become disuse and then disappearance. These are the same politics that determine the periphery's subordination to the center in the first place. While media use is made visible in our scholarship and celebrated in our lives, their disuse is rendered invisible. In Beirut, as media travel the distance from use to disuse to disappearance, they carve sharp edges around the city. Media scholars should ask what those edges look like and how they might challenge traditional narratives of media. While media activism in the Arab world is often marked by the visibility of bodies in protest, media waste is governed by a politics of invisibility, covering and hiding the very social problems that media activism seeks to address. My argument builds from Hatim El Hibri's (2014) assessment that during the Arab uprisings, a "cultural logic of visibility" depended on acts of concealment. To study what we see, El Hibri asserts, requires that we study what we don't see. Media waste similarly takes us to that in-between space between seeing and not seeing and asks that we take seriously the histories, communities, and environments that are covered, buried, and discarded.

### A place for media waste

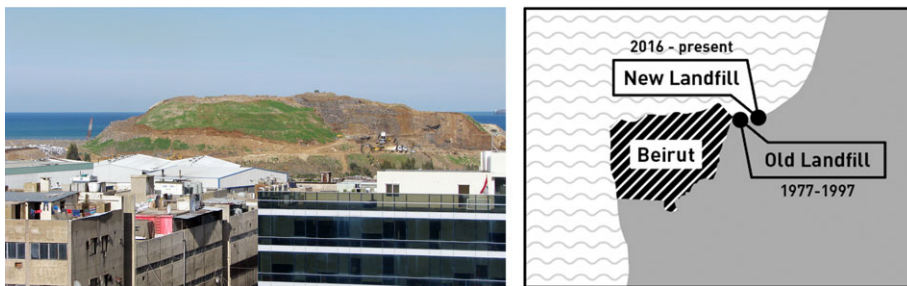
In Lebanon, the closure of the Naameh Landfill in 2015 meant the opening of two new dump sites closer to the city center: one in Costa Brava south of Beirut and another in Bourj Hammoud to the east of the city (Figure 2). According to statements by the Ministry of Agriculture, these two sites were selected because they were "already polluted" (Meraaby, 2017, para. 3). Of course *polluted* isn't just an environmental designation; it is also a social and cultural category. Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud were "already polluted" because they were made to be that way. Decades of war and disregard from Beirut's elite created these sites as socially inferior. According to officials, the Costa Brava landfill was intended to "rehabilitate" the waste problem there by barricading the toxic waste that flows into the sea (Al Kantar, 2015). The area, although densely populated, has laid among ruins since the 33-Day War in 2006, when Israel relentlessly attacked the south of Lebanon. Costa Brava's proximity to both the country's only airport and Hezbollah



**Figure 2** Beirut's trash moves from within the city limits to its peripheries. Map by the author.

institutions made it a target for bombings—an act of destruction that generated enormous amounts of waste and devastated the communities that lived there. Similarly, the Bourj Hammoud Landfill is next to a structure that local residents called Garbage Mountain (Figure 3). Under the grassy façade were tons of trash. What started as an informal dumping site in the early years of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) developed into an unregulated landfill when the country's waste crisis first began in 1977. The landfill operated until 1997, when it was finally shut down after nearby residents of Bourj Hammoud protested its prolonged existence. Although Costa Brava and Bourj Hammoud were positioned as new dumping sites in 2016, they were not new to the trash crisis at all. In each instance, their position as sites of waste were tied to a history of war in the country.

Most of the reporting on the two landfills has centered on the environmental impact of waste, especially because both spots are on the edge of the sea, with Costa Brava also dangerously close to the airport. It is important to bear in mind, however, that landfills are also socially constructed sites. The Costa Brava Landfill, for example, is located in a predominantly Shi'a neighborhood, adjacent to an area called *Dahieh* or literally the suburb. *Dahieh* comprises a number of different towns and municipalities south of Beirut. Historically it has been "stigmatized by Beirut dwellers (...) as an Islamist ghetto of poor rural migrants who are ignorant about urban life, and as a space of anarchy, chaos, and illegality" (Deeb & Harb, 2013, p. 25). Following the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, however, the nature of that stigmatization changed. At that time, political tension between Sunnis and Shi'as heightened and mapped onto the city, with the border

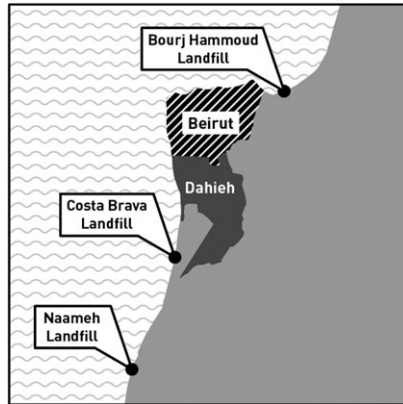


**Figure 3** The new Bourj Hammoud Landfill was opened next to a massive structure often referred to as “Garbage Mountain.” Garbage Mountain grew over the course of 20 years of unregulated trash disposal. Photograph by Robert Wittkuhn (2016). Map by the author.

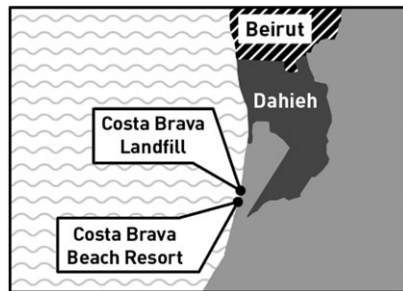
between Beirut and Dahieh “solidified as specifically Sunni-Shi’i” (Deeb & Harb, 2013, p. 25) (Figure 4). The movement of trash from Beirut into Dahieh reinforces these demarcations and the political and social structures that created them.

As Deeb and Harb (2013) have shown, although Dahieh is often disregarded as a “Hezbollah stronghold,” it is actually a dynamic urban space, where people negotiate their national and religious identities (p. 7). What happens to a vibrant space like Dahieh when it becomes the dumping ground for tons of trash, including waste from the very media devices that promise to challenge sectarian politics? The Costa Brava Landfill was named after a beach resort located just a few meters away from the dumping site (Figure 5) The beach resort was the first women-only beach to open in Lebanon. Much of the recent scholarship on Arab media has emphasized the display of bodies, especially the female body, as a form of protest (e.g. Mourad, 2013). But if we trace media waste to the Costa Brava Landfill and the nearby women-only beach it threatens to destroy, an entirely different narrative of media emerges.

Despite the beach resort’s resilience over the last 30 years, its current proximity to Beirut’s trash has likely spelled its end. The entire Costa Brava economy—both the beach resort and surrounding businesses—has been devastated by the landfill. As one nearby resident claimed, Costa Brava is now known as “a landfill district, a district that stinks (...) Nobody goes there” (Francis, 2018, para. 28). It is important to put the impending closure of Costa Brava in perspective. Coastlines make up Lebanon’s entire western border, reaching 225 kilometers from the country’s northern tips to its southern stretches. As a result, the sea has not only been important to Lebanon’s economy but also to its leisure. Lebanese social life has always depended on its many beaches. Yet for pious Muslim women the mixed-gendered nature of most beaches meant the foreclosure of one of the country’s main leisure activities. When Costa Brava and other women-only beaches opened in the 1980s and 1990s, so too did the opportunity for a large segment of Lebanese women to enjoy the country’s coastlines. Costa Brava became emblematic of socially- and religiously-sanctioned pleasure for these women. In the 1990s, Costa Brava was one of only



**Figure 4** The boundaries of Dahieh are difficult to determine since it is not a single geographic or administrative district, comprising instead several towns and municipalities. Nevertheless, the borders between Dahieh and Beirut are clear to their residents. Map by the author.



**Figure 5** The Costa Brava Landfill and Costa Brava Beach Resort are dangerously close. On most maps, the distance between them would be indiscernible. Map by the author.

two women-only beaches to receive *shar'i* status by religious officials in Dahieh. Such status meant that the beach had met certain standards to ensure that women were not exposed to immodest behavior and could not be seen from the outside (Harb & Deeb, 2007).

There are now a number of women-only beaches in Lebanon, so pious Muslim women have other options to enjoy the country's coastlines. What would be lost in the closure of Costa Brava is a history of women's pleasure and leisure. In the Arab world, the mediated naked female body—like the titular figure in Kraidy's (2016a) spectacular book *The Naked Blogger of Cairo*—has become a powerful form of protest, especially as it circulates globally. On the other side of the coin, though, are local places like the Costa Brava Beach Resort, which allow women's bodies to remain out of sight. These spaces are governed by a logic that prioritizes and even valorizes invisibility. It is easy to see how such sites can be quietly covered in trash;

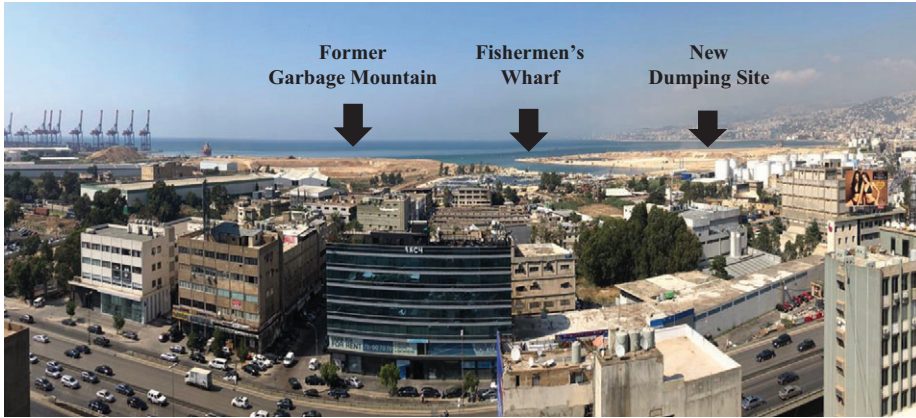
they were never supposed to be seen in the first place. The Costa Brava Landfill shows how media, at least in their disuse, are not separate from everyday politics and gender inequalities in Lebanon.

### The disappearing mountain

While the Costa Brava Landfill to the south of Beirut overlays the story of women's leisure with trash, the Bourj Hammoud Landfill to the east of the city muddies a history of minorities and migrants. Studies of media in the Arab world take for granted the Arab user. To write of media use in an Arab country is to write of Arabs specifically. A country like Lebanon, however, represents diversity that is diminished when the term *Arab world* is deployed uncritically. Lebanon houses, for example, a large Armenian community. It also hosts thousands of migrant workers, many of whom come from Africa and Asia. Bourj Hammoud, a municipality east of the Beirut River, encapsulates Lebanon's urban diversity. What began as a camp for Armenians fleeing genocide in central Anatolia at the beginning of the 20th century has become a diverse working-class neighborhood that still maintains an Armenian identity. At the same time, Bourj Hammoud has never been just about the Armenians. It has a long-standing Shi'a community, and during the civil war it served as a refuge for internally displaced populations within Lebanon. More recently, the affordable cost of housing in Bourj Hammoud—especially compared to nearby Beirut—has made it a destination for both migrant workers and Syrian refugees.

As Nucho (2016) argues, Bourj Hammoud's working-class quality—coupled with its diversity and the strain on its limited resources—has created a dependence on sectarian politics, which often provide public services where the central government does not. One such public service is waste management. Nucho reads the Garbage Mountain in Bourj Hammoud as a “visible” reminder of the lack of infrastructure in the country (p. 34). Her use of the word *visible* here proves useful to theorizing the politics of invisibility. As Nucho claimed, the materiality of infrastructural failures, like Garbage Mountain, could be “made visible” by local officials as they sought funding from international development organizations (p. 35). Implicit in this claim is the question of address. To whom is something made visible? And from whom does it remain invisible? While Garbage Mountain and the adjacent landfill were eye sores to Bourj Hammoud's residents (and occasionally strategic sites/sights for local officials seeking external funding), they were far from view for most of Beirut's residents. Currently, however, the once towering Garbage Mountain is no longer visible to anyone. Since the reopening of the Bourj Hammoud Landfill, Garbage Mountain has been completely dismantled. The tons of trash that once constituted the structure have been dumped into the sea to build out the coastline and prepare for more incoming trash (Figure 6).

What is hidden under the layers of garbage in Bourj Hammoud is decades-long, grassroots activism to keep Beirut's trash out of the municipality. Many of these



**Figure 6** Garbage Mountain no longer exists. Its trash piles were used to extend the shorelines in order to accommodate the new Bourj Hammoud landfill. Photograph by the author.

efforts have capitalized on Bourj Hammoud's distinctly Armenian character. Since the early 1980s, the municipality has warded off attempts to establish a sewage treatment plant and waste processing center on nearby shorelines. The proposed plan included receiving trash from 50 different municipalities in Lebanon, including a large portion from Beirut (Nucho, 2016). Attempts to stall these plans have largely depended on positioning Bourj Hammoud as a uniquely Armenian neighborhood, entrenched in Armenian cultural traditions. Such narratives appeal to international agencies (Nucho, 2016). Similarly, the first closure of the Bourj Hammoud Landfill in 1997 came after the local residents took to the streets to protest. Many of those efforts were coordinated by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). Bourj Hammoud's eco-activism is not separate from the identity politics that have burdened Lebanese society.

The reopening of the Bourj Hammoud Landfill was an assault to the local activism that had been working for decades to resist the encroachment of Beirut's trash into the suburbs. The valorization of the You Stink Movement's post-sectarian agenda also diminished environmental activism that was tied to Lebanon's traditional political system, like in Bourj Hammoud. One of the main themes in the scholarship on the You Stink Movement has been its ability to transcend sectarian divides (Khalil, 2017; Kraidy, 2016b). But the political landscape at the time wasn't quite so simple. The You Stink Movement initially disavowed protests in which official representatives of the country's political parties participated. The movement did not just want collaboration between the country's political parties; it wanted to do away with political allegiances altogether. As Nucho (2016) has shown, however, people's affiliations with political parties often have to do with class. Those people who can afford to operate outside of sectarian politics have the financial resources to do so. They do not rely on political parties for support in the form of subsidies and public services. There is a class dimension that has gone unexplored in the You

Stink Movement, despite its origins. As [Abu-Rish \(2016\)](#) noted about the 2015 crisis, “While not without precedent in poorer neighborhoods, such heaps of rubbish had never appeared in more affluent areas” (para. 1). What was exceptional about the trash crisis in 2015 was the fact that middle- and upper-class Beirutis had to confront piles of garbage.

Class is famously difficult to track in online activism, and research has shown that while online activism—as compared to traditional offline activism—has opened up possibilities for certain social demographics, including age and gender, socioeconomic class is still a significant inhibitor when it comes to participating in all forms of activism ([Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013](#); [Wolfson, Crowell, Reyes, & Bach, 2017](#)). The time and resources required to protest make it a privilege. It is nearly impossible to locate the absence of class in media content analysis, which emphasizes what we can see in terms of posts, campaigns, and bodies. How do we study what we cannot see? By bookending media use with questions of access and waste, otherwise invisible narratives of class begin to emerge. Might class affect who has access to telecommunication systems? How do narratives of media waste lead us to places where class and sectarian politics are meaningful categories?

As worn posters, frayed computer chargers, expired batteries, and last year's smartphone models make their way from use to disuse, they travel from Beirut's center to the Bourj Hammoud Landfill. There, class matters. Every city, town, and village in Lebanon experiences daily electricity cuts. While Beirut receives 21 hours of state-provided electricity every day, Bourj Hammoud only receives an average of 16 hours of electricity. During power cuts, people depend on generators to power-up their lives. Generators are usually operated by privately owned companies (often linked to political parties) and require subscriptions. In Bourj Hammoud, the cost of such a subscription varies each month but averages 120,000 Lebanese Pounds (\$80). In Beirut, however, the monthly cost for generator access—depending on the number of amperes—is set at 60,000 Lebanese Lira (\$40) or half the price. [Parks \(2015\)](#) has shown how in rural Zambia access to telecommunication systems is tied to larger narratives of water and electricity. In urban Lebanon, too, access to all media depend on an electric grid that is inherently unstable. To overcome its instability requires money through generator subscriptions. What happens in a working-class area like Bourj Hammoud, where access to a generator costs upwards of \$80 a month? Even as high-speed fiber optic Internet makes its way into Beirut ([Figure 7](#)), we cannot assume that access to the Internet is universal in Lebanon. Class is a determining factor. It is not a coincidence that Bourj Hammoud receives both less state electricity than Beirut but also its trash. By understanding Bourj Hammoud as a final resting place for Beirut's media waste, we can see how media access, class, sectarian politics, and trash are all connected; these connections have been largely unexplored in the scholarship on Arab media.



**Figure 7** In the summer of 2018, Beirut residents experienced the arrival of fiber optic cables. Photograph by the author.

### The labor of disuse

Decades of critiquing technological deterministic scholarship have taught us that human input and agency matter to media at every step—from inception and production to diffusion and mass adoption. Just as we have long acknowledged the importance of people to media use, we also need to generate accounts of human engagement with media waste. Who is the so-called user in media disuse? Beyond the communities that contend with the piles of media waste in their neighborhoods, we also have to theorize a labor of disuse: the people responsible for transporting discarded media from bins and dumpsters to processing plants and landfills. Focusing on labor has been one way that media scholars have uncovered otherwise invisible narratives of both creativity and exploitation (e.g., [Curtin & Sanson, 2016](#); [Hill, 2016](#)). These works intersect with themes that have been central to my argument in this article, in particular the environment, class, ethnicity, and gender. [Nakamura \(2014\)](#), for example, has revealed how Fairchild Semiconductor—a Silicon Valley pioneer—recruited Navajo women as electronic production workers. She shows that the company's depiction of these women racialized this kind of labor and that the encroachment of an electronics manufacturing plant onto a Navajo reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico was a continuation of the environmental destruction of Native American land. Like Nakamura, I am interested in exploring a kind of labor and a kind of laborer not usually associated with media; unlike Nakamura and most other scholars who engage with media labor, I want to move beyond the labor of *production* and instead briefly theorize the labor of media disuse in Lebanon.

The labor of disuse in Beirut is governed by the same politics of invisibility that determine the larger story of media waste. Waste management in Beirut crosses informal and formal economies and the public and private sectors. Since 1994, Beirut's waste management has been outsourced to private companies. At the same time, the work of processing, transporting, and selling trash has also largely

depended on work within an informal economy. Saleh's (2016) ethnographic work on trash pickers in Beirut shows just how entangled Lebanon's informal and formal economies are. On the one hand, scrap metal is Lebanon's second-largest export. On the other hand, this lucrative industry depends on informal labor performed primarily by migrant workers—most notably Syrian children. Saleh studies not only how these children make sense of their existence in Beirut but also how Lebanese residents perceive them and liken them to “cockroaches” (p. 93). Of course, scrap metal is part of a larger story of media waste, especially since many media technologies contain some sort of metal, including computers, television sets, radios, and antennas. According to Saleh, teenage boys scavenge trash heaps searching for metal. They bring their finds to a basement scrapyards facility, where they receive a commission for every piece of metal they've collected. Although Lebanon's fragile economy depends on the work they perform (scrap metal is the second largest export, after all), these child laborers lead precarious lives in Beirut. With no documents allowing them to work in Lebanon and no path to citizenship even if they did, these children constantly dream of home. At the same time, they are the targets of antagonism and racism from local residents, as the slur cockroach suggests. As a result, these workers are often forced out of sight and into their underground scrapyards. Saleh's work brings forward the important story of this vulnerable population of laborers, who are, I argue, media laborers. These workers' livelihood is intimately tied to trash, and yet without the resources or the rights to protest, their voices were absent from the You Stink Movement, but more than that, these lives have not been accounted for in the scholarship on media in the Arab world.

Work within the formal business of waste management shares many of the same qualities. The majority of waste management employees who perform the labor of transporting and processing trash, including media waste, are migrant workers, primarily coming from South Asia and Syria. Unlike the boys in the scrapyards that Saleh studies, these workers are registered employees in Lebanon and classified by the Ministry of Labor as tier-three laborers, a designation for low- or un-skilled workers. Despite their legal status and their participation in the formal economy, the men who transport trash out of Beirut are made invisible. Legally, their residence is tied to their employment, which means they are always temporary residents. This temporariness is complicated by the fact that Beirut does not want to confront the people who collect its trash. Beirut's trash collectors live in dormitories outside of the city and are bussed into the city for their shifts (Hamill, 2012). Similarly, while in the city, they are forced into invisible corners to socialize and relax, including behind dumpsters and under bridges. Trash and trash work are stigmatized in Lebanon, as elsewhere, and this stigma has only intensified since the Beirut trash crisis in 2015 (Saleh, 2016).

Scholars of media labor have recovered narratives about the ways in which the production of media technologies is intimately tied to the laborer's body. Nakamura (2014) in her study of Navajo women shows how in the mid-20th century American technology companies often understood women of color through their

“nimble fingers” (p. 919). The reason that these narratives matter is because they show how digital culture is gendered, racialized, and colonized at the moment of production. The labor of media *disuse* reveals how these inflections continue through the full lifecycle of media technologies, even as they arrive at their final resting place. Nakamura demonstrates that technology companies visualized the electronic laborer's body in a gendered and racialized way, where it became marketable as commodity. The bodies associated with the labor of disuse, however, have been rendered completely invisible, and yet these are also the bodies most at risk. The work of transporting and processing trash is demanding and strenuous, and also toxic. There is no doubt that trash collection is hazardous work. The trash collector's body remains invisible because of the stigma of trash but also because the social, racial, and legal structures in Lebanon allow for it. To imagine—as popular and scholarly discourse often does—that digital media will somehow liberate people from those structures is to see only half the story. The way in which media contribute to a larger waste crisis in Beirut underscores how certain bodies are left trapped within oppressive structures not despite but rather because of media.

## Conclusion

Increasingly media use operates according to an ethos of visibility, and this fact becomes a soft spot in our scholarship as we study what we can see. Media studies has long favored approaches that examine the production and reception of media content. (Parks and Starosielski, 2015). As Gitelman (2006) reminds us, however, media are “structures of communication” that are bound in part by their “technological forms and their associated protocols” (p. 7). Such a definition is a call to attend to the material forms of media. At the same time, I argue that “protocols” should also include the disposal of media. What kinds of social, cultural, and political narratives begin to emerge when we pay attention to how media are physically rendered as trash? By temporarily reducing media to their material forms and tracing their journey from use to disuse, the invisible stories behind media activism start to appear. Currently, discarded media travel from within the city limits to largely working-class areas, where residents of Beirut no longer see the waste they have produced. Videos of Lebanon's trash crisis continue to circulate through digital platforms, especially provocative images of the country's shorelines filled with plastic bottles. The destruction of the Mediterranean Sea easily captures the attention of international organizations and activists.

Although mediated images of Lebanon's trash are readily available online, the landfill sites themselves are far out of sight and nearly impossible to access. My own field visits to the two landfills revealed how the desire to make trash invisible in Lebanon is not just a matter of geography but also the result of careful procedures and policies. For example, from 10-storied high, the Bourj Hammoud Landfill was easily visible (Figure 8). On the ground-level, however, it wasn't just the sights that were inaccessible; the sites themselves also were out of reach. The nearby industrial



**Figure 8** The Bourj Hammoud Landfill, which now extends into the sea, is easily visible from up high, but on the ground it is nearly impossible to find. Photograph by the author.

area consists of many narrow roads, almost none of which gave way to the landfill site. There were only two tiny points of access: one through an ailing fisherman's wharf. Even as I stood on the landfill next to a sign that read "The Worksite of the Bourj Hammoud Landfill. Entry is Forbidden," the guards denied that this was the dumping site. There is a social and cultural desire to see trash disappear, but there is also an infrastructure, no matter how informal, that allows that desire to become realized.

As I have argued throughout this article, it is not just trash that is made invisible in Lebanon. Communities adjacent to the landfills and the people who service them also fade out of sight. A women-only beach, a refugee camp from the early 20th century, and some of the most vulnerable populations in the country all exist alongside the heaps of Beirut's trash. They are part of the story of media in the Arab world because media are waste. The obscuring of both media waste and the people directly affected by it is exactly the politics of invisibility at work. Media waste is made invisible in practice and in our scholarship for the same reason that Bourj Hammoud and Costa Brava landfills remain out of sight. The discourse on digital media is rooted in the ideals of liberal western democracy (Diamond & Plattner, 2012). To acknowledge media as waste would be to untangle those roots. How can digital media become spaces for liberal democracy, while also being inherently destructive and unjust to the natural environment? Similarly, sectarian-based eco-activism, a beach that accommodates religious women in an area commonly disregarded as a

“Hezbollah stronghold,” and migrant workers with few rights challenge a narrative of media democracy. A discussion of waste focuses our attention back on the material realities of media, where there are stories that don't always fit into a linear progression of liberal democracy. The landfill is messy, and so are all the stories that exist around it, but there we find everyday negotiations with media as they are dismantled, disabled, and disused. Not every account of media in the Arab world needs to account for waste, but the field as a whole does need to acknowledge that one person's participatory culture is another person's trash.

## Note

- 1 It is important to note that at the same time that NGOs and start-ups legitimize activism, they can also replicate the same power hierarchies that otherwise determine public life in Lebanon. Their work and services go largely unregulated, and recent criticism (Raidy, 2018) has called into question whether these initiatives have a vested interest in solving the waste problem in Lebanon when that their funding and revenue streams depend on it.

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