

From:

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Blogging in Beirut

An Ethnography of a Digital Media Practice

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Unlike previous media-analytic research, Sarah Jurkiewicz's anthropological study understands blogging as a social field and a domain of practice. This approach underlines the significance of blogging in practitioners' daily lives and for their self-understanding. In this context, the notion of publicness enables a consideration of publics not as static 'spheres' that actors merely enter, but as produced and constituted by social practices. The vibrant media landscape of Beirut serves as a selection of samples for an ethnographic exploration of blogging.

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Foreword

This book is the result of my Ph.D. project, conducted between 2009 and 2012 in the framework of a Ph.D. fellowship at Oslo University, Norway, with extended research periods in Beirut, Lebanon in 2009/2010 and 2011.

The case studies of seven bloggers discussed in this book represent a specific moment in the history of the ever- and fast-changing landscape of digital media – or even “polymedia”, i.e. the hybrid media ecologies and varied use of media technologies.¹ Moreover, they represent a historic specific moment of digital media in a concrete regional context – along the lines discussed by Miller et al. (2016), who make a case for describing social media not in general but as “a regional case” (ibid.: x).²

Being a blogger in Beirut from 2009 to 2012 meant being a blogger in a period prior to and also partly during the Arab revolts that broke out in late 2010 in Tunisia and then in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria. The relation of the Arab revolts to digital media was heavily debated in research, in journalism and among bloggers alike (see also the introduction to this book).³ With regards to blogging, the media scholars and activists Enrico de Angelis and Donatella Della Ratta state (2014) that in the Middle East a change occurred in blogging in this time and that one has to separate two periods: up till 2011 and afterward.

Following the enormous hype around blogging and other digital media platforms in the early 2000s until the outbreak of the revolts, more critical voices appeared from 2012 onwards – from within both academia and the blogger com-

1 See Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou (2012), who introduced this term.

2 See Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes et al. (2016): *How the World Changed Social Media*. They argue for “a greater sensitivity to regional and social differences and their consequences” in research on social media (ibid.: 12).

3 See David McMurray and Amanda Ufheil-Somers (2016): *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East*, Minnesota: Indiana University Press 2016, covering events in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.

munities themselves.⁴ At the end of 2012, Tony Saghbini (aka Adon), one of the bloggers portrayed in this book, argued that the blogging scene would be increasingly characterised by internal disputes and that social media do not necessary lead to common action. He continues, “We find a lot of individual activists out there, but very few effective organizations.”⁵ Furthermore, he laments the “overload of information” and “the substitution of long-term political work with short-time actions”.⁶ In a similar vein, Middle East scholar Marc Lynch highlights that social media would be “more useful in organizing protests than organizing civil society”, in the sense that leaderless movements are helpful in establishing loose connections, but not for a “coherent political strategy” (Lynch 2013: n. p.).

Being a blogger in Beirut in the period just before and after 2011 meant being situated in a historical and what at times felt like a ‘revolutionary’ moment that, however, quickly began to dissolve, quite divergently in the different national contexts. This book thus catches snapshots of this moment by closely following various Lebanese bloggers.

Yet one may ask what this story tells us in 2017 – in retrospect and beyond the specific time frame. For one, the book tells us something about digital media practices, here blogging, in their relation to personal and professional trajectories in a specific local context and within specific material conditions. The book also sheds light on wider media trajectories and temporalities. Furthermore, it highlights the interplay between digital media and activism, as well as between digital media and other sets of practices.

The seven main characters presented in this book continue partly blogging today only while still being active on digital media in general. Thus, their online activities have changed to a great degree. Only a few are still active on the blog platforms they heavily engaged in from 2009-2012. The reasons are only to some extent due to the changing media ecologies, where other digital media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) have been dominating ever since. In fact, as I argue in this book, the professional, personal and political trajectories of the bloggers have been crucial for their blogging practice and its changes.

Only four of the seven bloggers portrayed in the following are still in Lebanon (Assaad, Khodor aka Jou3an, Maya and Rami), and of those who stayed, most moved out of their parental home, got married and started a family.⁷ Assaad and Khodor, freelance journalists at the time of the study, have both been working,

4 See for example Marc Lynch’s article on “Twitter Devolutions: How social media is hurting the Arab Spring” (Lynch 2013).

5 Email communication with Tony Saghbini (aka Adon) from November 12, 2011.

6 Ibid.

7 With the exception of Assaad, who already lived on his own during the time of my study and is not married.

amongst other things, as marketing and digital media consultants over the last years. Maya has continued her own business as a graphic designer and became the co-founder of an ‘explainer and animated videos’ company, and Rami is still working as an IT consultant (currently at a bank). Activist bloggers Hani (aka Hanibaael) and Tony (aka Adon) both went to work in the Gulf in bigger media co-operations: Hani is currently a producer at Al-Jazeera+ in Doha, and Tony works as Content Specialist at a Digital Marketing Agency in Dubai. Liliane aka FunkyOzzi had first moved to Ireland and then to Dubai, where she works as Regional Product Marketing Manager with Facebook. Only the two ‘non-political’ bloggers Rami and Liliane are still active in blogging on a continuous basis: Rami with *Plus961* – the telephone code for Lebanon – on diverse things going on in Lebanon, from culture to commerce, and Liliane (who has given up political blogging) with her travel blog *Travel With Funk*.⁸ Former activist bloggers Hani and Tony only sporadically update their blogs⁹ while the other activist bloggers do not continue to produce content on these platforms anymore.

As the case studies illuminate, blogging functioned as a professionalisation tool in their early career years. At the time of the research, most of my interlocutors were not married yet and without family duties, trying to establish themselves in different professional domains or searching for possible jobs. Their blogs thus represent certain stages in their lives, mostly in these early professionalisation years, while they are now more established in professional domains that are often closely connected to digital media practices. In short, one could argue, they do not need blogging as a professionalisation tool anymore, though it provided them with a useful foundation.

This is not to say that blogging is dead; it can still provide a meaningful tool for specific purposes.¹⁰ When I last met Khodor in March 2017, he told me that the blog focusing on Lebanese problems portrayed in this study had been an interim stage for him. However, he plans on opening a new blog that will have a different focus, a blog that rather talks about “strategies and solutions”, not just problems. He is still heavily politically engaged, currently focusing on the Palestinian issue again, incited by the death of a comrade of his in the West Bank.

Also, micro-blogging on various platforms remains crucial in the political activities of the activist bloggers portrayed here. Moreover, their blogging experience and political self-positioning and exposure through blogging is not to be underestimated in their ‘careers’ as political activists. The blogger Assaad for in-

8 See <http://blog.funkyozzi.com/> and <http://www.plus961.com/>. For a full list of blogs and websites relevant to this study, see the appendix (in which it is indicated if they are not online anymore in September 2017).

9 <https://hanibaael.wordpress.com/> and <https://saghbini.wordpress.com/>

10 See the introduction for more on this argument by media scholar Jodi Dean.

stance, has been a spokesperson for the “You Stink” campaign (#tol3et_rehet kom), which was one of the main groups that initiated the movement in response to the garbage crisis in Lebanon in 2015.¹¹ The group had an elaborated media campaign on various platforms.¹² Under the slogan “You Stink” not only the mismanagement of the garbage crisis, but also the corruption and clientelism of the political elite were denounced. In this case, continuities with protests in 2011 against the ‘sectarian system’ (under the slogan *Ash-sha’b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām at-tā’ifī*), discussed in different sections of this book, in terms of actors and causes are to be found.¹³ Roadblocks, demonstrations and smaller sit-ins were in the repertoire of the wider movement that mobilised 20,000 people in the demonstrations in August 2015 with violent clashes between protestors and the security forces. However, the different groups of the wider collation within the movement that crossed political and sectarian boundaries entered into conflicts about their attitudes towards militant protestors and the authorities. As a report by Lebanon Support outlines:

Interestingly, some of these groups emerged to distance themselves from the You Stink organisers, who have been criticised for adopting ‘limited and reformist’ demands, and for requesting that the internal security forces arrest protestors who have been reportedly described as ‘thugs’ [...] and ‘infiltrators’. This is also suggestive of an old but persisting cleavage between civil society organisations, with bloggers and other cyber-activists as the main organisers on the one hand, and more politicised collectives and groups on the other.¹⁴

Bloggers and cyber activists, like Assaad, thus became prominent figures in organising the protests, yet were also heavily criticised within the course of the events. This book traces the personal blogging trajectories of figures like Assaad and helps understand their coming of age as public figures through their blogging practice. The suggestion of a cleavage between these activists and other collectives also links back to the limits of digital media as a tool for organising civil society on a long-term basis, as referred to above.¹⁵

This monograph stays within its prescribed limits and provides a thick description and analysis of the field of blogging that I have researched in the spe-

11 For a chronology, see Lebanon Support, <http://civilsociety-centre.org/timelines/31033>, accessed May 29, 2017.

12 The movement on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/tol3etre7etkom/>; on Twitter: @tol3et_rehetkom.

13 See further Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, Myriam Catusse and Miriam Younes 2016.

14 See <http://civilsociety-centre.org/timelines/31033>, accessed May 29, 2017.

15 See the arguments of Tony Saghbini and Marc Lynch (2013) above.

cific time frame. The media context and internet¹⁶ landscape presented in the first chapter is meant to provide the context for that study and accordingly describes the state of the art from 2009 up to late 2011 – and not the current state. A few comparative data shall be added here to get a fuller picture of the general developments since 2011.

When comparing the latest data on internet access in Lebanon with that on 2011, major shifts can be detected.¹⁷ Compared with only 1.2 million users (29% internet penetration) in June 2011, over four and a half million internet users are reported for June 2016 (75.3%) in Lebanon. However, in comparison with the overall development of the region, Lebanon's position has not changed completely. It is still situated similarly to Jordan (72.4%) and lags behind the Arabian Gulf States such as Bahrain (90.1%) and Qatar (97.4%).¹⁸

As for press freedom, Lebanon's situation has deteriorated only slightly from 2011, when Reporters Without Borders ranked it 93 out of 173 countries; it is now ranked 99 out of 179. Lebanon's media are described as "extremely politicized and polarized", and "Bloggers and online journalists may receive summonses from the 'bureau for combatting cyber-crimes' if something they have posted on a social network elicits a complaint from a private party."¹⁹

This trend has also been observed in the time frame of this study, yet due to the war in Syria, the politicisation of the media has even been aggravated.²⁰

It is beyond the scope of this book to continue the story of the local field and actors after 2012. More qualitative insights on the local field require a new study. The book is precisely an account of the specific period covered by my ethnographic research.

Berlin, September 2017

16 I do not spell internet with a capital "I", as this suggests that the internet is a place or a being and gives it a rather problematic agency (Markham and Baym 2009: vii).

17 When evaluating Internet access and digital media usage, mobile phone applications must also be considered, as an article on mobile phone use and WhatsApp in Lebanon by Jared McCormick (2013) demonstrates. See http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15495/the-whispers-of-whatsapp_beyond-facebook-and-twitt, accessed May 18, 2017.

18 As for the most prominent websites, according to Alexa statistics, in contrast to 2011, Facebook is not at rank one anymore, but now at rank four, while Lebanese Google (<https://www.google.com.lb>) is on the top. Yet, Google (both *.com* and *com.lb*) and YouTube are still place among the top four, as in 2011. See <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB>, accessed May 23, 2017.

19 <https://rsf.org/en/lebanon>, accessed May 23, 2017.

20 See also Nötzold 2015: 224f.

Introduction

Lebanese bloggers have to take it easy on blogging and not just talk about politics like the newspapers do. Just do what the European and American bloggers do, just write about contemporary stuff.

RAMI 11¹

We should discuss more and blogging is the sphere where we can discuss it.

ADON 11

I've been blogging for a long time, so I know very well what works, what idea you can say that would keep you safe and not have anyone attack you.

LILIANE 12

A blog is more official, you know, and more professional. And it is not flexible, not everyone wants to go to a blog to make a comment, on Facebook he does the comment in 30 seconds.

HANIBAAEL 11

It's a hobby, and I think if it is to become my full-time job it would change. [...] Then I wouldn't enjoy it that much.

MAYA 11

1 All introductory quotes stem from interviews I conducted with Lebanese bloggers in Beirut in the period of 2009-2011. For a full list of interviews including date, place and language, see the appendix.

Blogging in the Middle East has attracted international attention, especially since the events of the Arab uprisings.² Amongst other social media³, blogging has been portrayed as one of the factors that helped to organise and spread the revolutionary events from Tunisia to Egypt and beyond. Intense discussion about the role of social media within these processes has been going on within academia and the media, at times in the format of blogs and other online platforms itself.⁴ An even greater interest in studying the relation between social media and social change has developed.⁵ The impact of blogging on politics has been the primary focus of the existing studies. In much of the work on blogging in the Middle East, it “has been hailed as a new opportunity for public communication, political activism, and a democratic public sphere”, as John W. Anderson (2009: n. p.) outlined.⁶ Furthermore, Western media have portrayed bloggers in orientalising ways, and, as Enrico de Angelis and Donatella Della Ratta (2014: n. p.) put it, bloggers themselves have been “contribut[ing] to the fantasy of the Arab blogger”, in the sense of the former-

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- 2 See Rami G. Khouri’s (2011) critical consideration of the term ‘Arab spring’ in which he calls for dropping the term.
 - 3 While all media are to be considered social, ‘social media’ commonly describes web-based and mobile technologies. I also use the more value-free term ‘digital media’, which, as Coleman (2010: 488) highlights, “encompasses a wide range of nonanalog technologies, including cell phones, the Internet, and software applications that power and run on the Internet, among others.”
 - 4 For the case of Egypt, see various articles on *Jadaliyya* (<http://www.jadaliyya.com/>), an online magazine (ezine) under the umbrella of the Arab Studies Institute (for instance, Hirschkind 2011 and Herrera 2011). See also entries on <http://www.mediasocialchange.net/>, maintained by the *EASA Media Anthropology Network* (Peterson 2011, Sreberny 2011) as well as the contributions in *Arab Media and Society* (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). See also the monographs on the Egyptian revolution and digital media by Herrera 2014 and Faris 2013. For a discussion in Arabic of blogging and the uprisings, see Suweiha 2011. See also, for a general discussion, Morozov’s 2011 *Net Delusion* and the debate about the book (Doctorow 2011 and Zuckerman 2011).
 - 5 Most studies focus on the role of social media in the uprisings. See amongst others a study by the Project on Information Technology and Political Islam (2012). The study is based on a huge amount of online data (analysing more than three million Tweets); according to the authors, the result “is that for the first time we have evidence confirming social media’s critical role in the Arab Spring.” (Ibid.: 2)
 - 6 See the section “Research perspectives: blogs as media practice and the public sphere” for an overview of the state of research.

ly repressed activist who is then, “thanks to networked technologies, finally able to re-seize her right to self-expression and to share her thoughts”.⁷

Especially for Western intellectuals, it is tempting to assume the ‘free expression of individuals’ as *the* sign of democracy and a Western-defined ‘public sphere’. From an anthropological angle, this perspective is, however, to be criticised as ethnocentric. A conceptual shift towards *alternative* publics on the line of ‘alternative modernities’⁸ beyond a Western normative conceptualisation is required to shed light on multiple forms of publicness in various local contexts. Moreover, ethnographic studies of the uses of social media and their role in daily life (also beyond revolutionary events) can provide new insights into the dynamics of social media and change, as well as the continuities with previous forms of publicness.

This monograph aims to contribute to the wider discussion of the role of social media in the Middle East and beyond. It examines blogging from a perspective that is underrepresented in these discussions: one that frames the practice of blogging and its role in daily life as well as the self-understanding of the practitioners, based on anthropological fieldwork. I will analyse how blogging as a social field and “domain of practice” (Postill 2008: 414) is internally organised, locally contained, translocally connected and produced in a specific location. To this end, I followed a group of bloggers in a concrete local context over an extended period of time. The introductory quotes display different Lebanese bloggers’ stances towards the political context in Lebanon and their standards for good blogging. They also address the relation between blogging and their professional work and other digital media practices. These are the different dimensions of blogging that this monograph deals with, based on extensive case studies. I show how media practices impact everyday life as well as the social fields the practitioners interact in. The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of digital media practices.

7 See Enrico de Angelis and Donatella Della Ratta’s reflections on the panel “Mind the Gap: Bridging Knowledge and Practices of Activism” during the Fourth Bloggers Meeting in Amman in January 2014 (De Angelis and Della Ratta 2014).

8 See Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (1999) for a discussion of alternative modernities in which he highlights that in all local contexts modernity is manifold and not singular; and it is always incomplete (1999:18). In a similar way, the public sphere (as a normative concept and constituent of modernity) must be understood in the plural.

POSITIONING MY STUDY

This study is situated within what is called the ‘Lebanese blogosphere’,⁹ which is known for being especially active in times of political crisis, for example in the Independence Intifada 2005 and in the ‘July War’ in 2006. Yet, also beyond these political events, a range of Lebanese bloggers has been writing about daily life, especially in Beirut, mocking political discussions, commenting on social issues and posting about cultural events in the capital. It is these everyday practices of and around blogging that I analyse here. I concentrate on local bloggers based in Lebanon who blog intensively, i.e. posting at least weekly or more frequently. They are mainly young Beirutians in their twenties and early thirties. Thematically, I concentrate on blogs dealing with political, social and cultural issues.¹⁰ While the time frame of this study is from summer 2009 to summer 2011, a particular focus lies on winter 2009/10 and spring 2011, during which I conducted fieldwork in Lebanon.

The focus of my research lies on this particular local field of blogging and the practices and materialities of blog production. Thus, my central interest is not the text, but the social, cultural and material context of blogging. While the core object is the practice of blogging, the scope is widened to “situate and contextualise the observed practices and [...] to generate ethnographic texture” (Spitulnik 2010: 107).¹¹ In order to understand the cultural meaning of blogging and practices that evolve from such a media practice, the analysis of the production process is essential. In addition, the bloggers’ self-perception and their blogging ethos will be analysed, as I consider them to be intrinsic parts and a structuring force of the production practice.

In accordance with Gabriella Coleman’s classification (2010) of research approaches in the field of media ethnography, my study is to be understood as both an inquiry into what she calls a “vernacular culture of digital media” (ibid.: 488) (here: blogging) and an inquiry into its relation to other kinds of social practices.¹² Socio-cultural anthropology analyses media practices in their context and does not focus primarily on the content as such. Not the medium is the message, in a McLuhanian understanding,¹³ but the media are its practices.

9 For a problematisation of the term blogosphere, see the introduction to part I, 35ff.

10 For more on the selection of case studies, see the section “Methods and ethics off- and online” in this introduction, 21ff.

11 According to what Spitulnik (2010) describes as “wide-angle lenses on media”. Yet no open-end contextualisation is envisaged.

12 The latter she labels “prosaics of digital media”, which “examines how digital media feed into, reflect, and shape other kinds of social practice” (2010: 488).

13 As outlined in *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan 1967).

By closely following the practitioners, I will shed light on their media practice in the context of their daily lives. I will trace their route into blogging and how they actually blog and discuss what they variously understand as good blogging practice – different perspectives and dimensions that are indicated in the introductory citations. The aim is not to provide a representative study of the whole Lebanese blogosphere as such, i.e. all blogging activities from and about Lebanon, but an in-depth analysis of a cluster of bloggers, which provides insights into the production of blogs ‘on site’ (mainly Beirut).

Lebanon as field site

Due to my interest in alternative forms of representation and also my previous work on journalistic practice (Jurkiewicz 2009), I became particularly interested in Lebanese blogging during the July War of 2006, during which blogs provided a translocal ‘counter-voice’ to the Israeli assaults.¹⁴ Lebanon is known for its vibrant and pluralistic media landscape, which has proved to be influential throughout the whole region since the middle of the 19th century.¹⁵ Due to its huge, influential diaspora, estimated at more than 15 million people in contrast to about 4 million in country,¹⁶ Lebanon is strongly marked by translocal connections, both in its media production and in other social fields. The diverse Lebanese media landscape is also to be set in relation to Lebanon’s political segmentation, which has also led to a strong segmentation in the media sphere: each political wing or party has its own media outlets. This media context, somehow untypical compared with other countries in the region, makes Lebanon a particular case.

Blogging as a moving target

Blogging can be understood as a mode of production (Bruns 2008), a writing genre (Miller and Shepherd 2004) and a vernacular culture of digital media (see Coleman above). It is certainly to be understood as a “moving target” (Welz 1998) in the sense of a phenomenon that is constantly changing and hard to localise.¹⁷ Conse-

14 As I discuss in chapter 1.1.

15 For a short overview on Lebanon’s media landscape, see an article by the European Journalism Centre (2010). I will provide more details in chapter 1.

16 The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division (2010) estimated Lebanon’s population at 4,224,000 in 2010, *World Population Prospects*, United Nations, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/p2k0data.asp>, retrieved February 28, 2011.

17 See Welz (1998) for a discussion of “moving targets” and the conditions of contemporary fieldwork “under the pressure of mobility”.

quently, studying blogging confronts one with fast-changing media usages and research trends (see also Dean 2010).

The term *blog*, as a contraction of the words web and log, was first used in 1997. It was in the late 1990s that the first free online tools appeared that made it easy to publish online.¹⁸ In Arabic, blog was later translated as *mudawwana*,¹⁹ building on the verb *dawwana*, meaning to log or to register. A blog can be defined as

a frequently updated Web-based chronological publication, a log of personal thoughts and Web links, a mixture of the diary forms around what is happening in a person's life, and reports and comments on what is happening on the Web and the world out there. (Lovink 2008a: 3)

The topics of blogs are thus manifold, and it is not the content that defines the blog format (Gurak et al. 2004). Blogs can have either a single or several authors. Moreover, links and comments about other sites are a crucial feature of blogs. Blog templates make it possible to create new articles and add them to the data- or category-based archive, and tags added to each new post make it possible to filter a blog according to the categories established.

When I started designing this study in 2008, blogging was still at its peak and the media scholar Geert Lovink described blogs as “the proxy of our time” (2008a: xxiii). Meanwhile, some voices have argued that the time of blogging is over, since Facebook and Twitter have become faster and more efficient ways to reach an audience.²⁰ Or, as the political scientist and blog theoretician Jodi Dean (2010: 29) puts it: “Even if they’re not dead yet, their role in inciting practices of online disclosure, discussion, and surveillance has both already been displaced by other Web 2.0 platforms such as social networks and video-sharing”.

Nevertheless, blogging has not lost its momentum, in particular not in the Middle East. First, the numbers of bloggers and growing aggregators, as in Egypt in the time frame of this study, show that blogging is by no means a shrinking phenomenon.²¹ The Third Arab Bloggers Meeting in 2011 in Tunisia also reflected

18 Open Diary, launched in 1998, was one of these first tools, but in contrast to later blogging tools it was an anonymous diary community, followed by Pitas and then Blogger in 1999. For a brief history of weblogs, see Rettberg 2008: 22ff.

19 *Mudawwin* is the Arabic term for blogger, *tadwīn* stands for blogging. Yet, the English word is also used and even transcribed into Arabic script.

20 See for example Duray 2011 and Ingram 2011. In the local field I studied, several people also stated in 2011 that Facebook and not blogging is currently *the* tool.

21 According to Manal Hassan, an Egyptian blogger and the initiator of the Egyptian blog aggregator. (Informal talk on December 11, 2009 at the Second Arab Bloggers Meeting in Beirut.)

this.²² Furthermore, blogging is a role model for other digital media practices and shows continuities with other media practices and production modes online, such as micro-blogging on Twitter (launched in 2006) and Facebook. Most of the bloggers in the field I studied, for instance, use both of these micro-blogging tools in addition to blogging.²³ I do not intend to compare these tools thoroughly at this point, but a few distinct features need to be mentioned: in contrast to blogging, micro-blogging limits the size of postings²⁴ and is based on other dissemination structures than open blogs.²⁵ Whereas both open blogs and Twitter streams appear in a Google search, private Facebook profiles do not.²⁶ Blogs, as long as access is admitted, are in principle accessible to anyone who enters the link. Blogs present the most stable and searchable form of blogging through their website-like format and their long accessibility compared with Twitter streams. All tools, however, can be said to construct “a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system” (boyd²⁷/Ellison 2008: 11). Overall, studying blogging’s production contexts and practices sheds light on other media practices and how they are integrated and recombined and thus involves looking at the changing trends in digital media use.

Framing blogging: practice, field, locality

Blogging can be approached from different theoretical angles: as software and culture (as Lovink 2008a proposes), as a new public sphere and as media practice. Within Middle Eastern Studies, there was an ever-growing interest in and hype about blogging – yet, then also a slight ‘disillusionment’ about the capacity of social media (Lynch 2013) and blogging in particular.²⁸ The main questions have been, initially, those of its political impact and its capacity “to construct a democratic public sphere” (Armbrust 2007: 532). However, these factors are hard to determine. There has been wide discussion about how blogging should be framed conceptually, whether as a democratic public sphere, a “networked public” (Anderson 2009) or a ‘counter-public’. The Habermasian public sphere concept, or the search for its realisation, is a lasting superstructure in the academic attempts to un-

22 See <http://arabloggers.com/blog/>, accessed October 16, 2011.

23 See chapter 4 and 5 in this book, where I analyse these continuities.

24 Twitter allows entries only up to 140 characters long.

25 In the case of Facebook, access is permitted by accepting ‘friend requests’; in Twitter it functions by ‘following’ others’ profiles. For a comprehensive history and definition of social networking sites, see boyd/Ellison 2008.

26 Open Facebook groups and fan pages appear, however, also on Google Search.

27 dana boyd does not capitalise her name. See her homepage <http://www.danah.org/>, accessed January 12, 2012.

28 As I already touched upon in the foreword to this book.

derstand recent developments, not only in blogging, but also in wider research on Middle Eastern publics (see more on that below). Overall, “the notion of a singular public sphere is often invoked as an either hopeful or menacing reality or possibility”, as Sune Haugbolle and Armando Salvatore point out (2010). The authors add for consideration that the notion of a singular public sphere vis-à-vis a counter-public is not an easy fit. Furthermore, as Haugbolle (2007: 7) outlines elsewhere, “The problem with normative theory is that it does not help us understand why and how actual communication plays out in the public sphere.” In analysing my material, I shared their scepticism and did not find the public sphere concept useful in understanding the local dynamics.²⁹ An examination and discussion of theoretical concepts of public sphere(s) that I will outline in the section on research perspectives was, however, important for clarifying my own perspective. Against this background, I searched for other conceptual tools to grasp the conditions and dynamics of blogging in this specific local context – instead of ‘testing’ the applicability of the Habermasian public sphere concept.

Haugbolle and Salvatore (2010) suggested the term *publicness* as a better translation of Habermas’ *Öffentlichkeit* than public sphere in order to shed light on “the transformation of social identities as a result of public interaction and the ensuing cultural change” (ibid.: n. p.).³⁰ Publicness is a helpful term to shift the focus to the “concrete ways of going and being public” (ibid.) and to the dynamics and fragmentation of contemporary publics. The term is not to be understood as a mere translation, but as a conceptual shift. Combined with the practice-theory approach to blogging that I follow, the actual practices of ‘doing publics’ come to the fore. Moreover, relying on my previous work on journalism as ethical practice (Jurkiewicz 2009), I extend this approach with the analysis of the self-perception and ethical standards of the practitioners of blogging in this study.

Beyond that, John Postill’s conceptualisation of the notion of the field – in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu and the Manchester School – in studying internet activism in suburban Malaysia (Postill 2008, 2011) presented an alternative theoretical frame for my work. The basic definition of a field as a “domain of practice” (Postill 2008: 414) allows the perspective to be shifted from a normative public sphere concept to the actual practices within a particular, socially organised field. Understanding blogging as *practice* means that it takes place in social fields and is embedded in – and has continuities with – other practices. I argue in this book that, by taking the notion of *field* instead of that of public sphere as starting point, the internal dynamics of blogging in the local Lebanese context and the

29 I will come back to this point when discussing the fragmentation of the Lebanese blogosphere (chapter 1.4) and the dynamics of publicness (chapter 8), see also Jurkiewicz 2011b.

30 Call for a panel on the World Congress of Middle Eastern Studies 2010.

online-offline continuum of blogging can be grasped more fully. The field of blogging as a domain of practice is not to be understood by looking solely at the product (the blog), but must include the social fields on the local level, where bloggers network, cooperate and compete with each other.

Thus, another vital component of my work is concentration on a concrete locality. Although blogging is a practice whose product is visible primarily online and is marked by translocal connections and transfer, the material, social, ideological and political context of production is bound to the local. The value of studying digital practices with a focus on the local is, however, disputed.³¹ Hine (2000: 61) notes that “by focusing on sites, locales, and places, we may be missing out on other ways of understanding culture, based on connection, difference, heterogeneity, and incoherence”. Although I think this is a valuable argument, the focus on sites and locales need not lead to ignoring these other ways of understanding. It should rather be considered a challenge to link the local site and the translocal connectedness of blogging. Especially because of the huge Lebanese diaspora, the topic of locality vis-à-vis translocal connections is also important for the dynamics in the local field of blogging.

Locality/the local comes into play on three different levels in my field of study: first, the *material* locality bloggers are confronted with, engage with and are bound to: places where they meet and network. The material locality involves the political context, certain districts in Beirut where bloggers live or hang out, experiences ‘on site’ that they write about – i.e. the field site in a rather traditional ethnographic sense. A second dimension of locality is the *virtual* locality: the level of the blog’s content and belonging to the Lebanese blogosphere, i.e. in the framing of a blog as being ‘Lebanese’ or ‘from Beirut’. The local becomes virtually materialised in various forms on the blog: in texts, photos, videos, drawings etc. A third level of locality is the ‘non-local’ participants in the field, such as the bloggers in the Lebanese diaspora.

Research questions

As already mentioned, my main research interest is the analysis of the local context and practices of blog production in Lebanon. I organised the research questions in three sets that aim at exploring the field, production practices and the publicness of blogging in Lebanon. Each of the three central questions is illustrated with some examples of sub-questions.

31 I will come back to this discussion in the paragraph on methods below.

1. How is the local field of blogging framed and structured on- and offline?
 - How did the local field evolve?
 - How do bloggers meet, cooperate and compete in the local field?
2. What are the context and practices of blogging in Lebanon?
 - What characterises bloggers' professional and social backgrounds, daily life and media practices?
 - How are blogs produced in practice?
 - How is blogging related to other media practices and domains of practice?
3. What are the practices and understandings of 'doing publicness'?
 - How do bloggers imagine and address the audience?
 - In their view, what makes a good and credible blogger?
 - How do they negotiate their 'going and being public'?
 - What issues do they consider important to make public and how do they position themselves towards the wider public?

Book outline

Reflecting the three sets of research questions, the study will be structured in a tripartite way. Each part will be introduced by a short discussion of the main concepts/approaches that will be used (field, practice, publicness). The overall structure also reflects my own itinerary of approaching the field: from examining the field online, through being at the concrete locality and meeting the actors to studying different aspects of publicness.

The first part, *THE FIELD*, outlines the context, history and organisation of the local field. In the first chapter, I give an overview of the media landscape and internet in Lebanon. I will trace the short history of Lebanese blogging and discuss its specifics in the regional context. Following up on this, I will analyse its differentiation online. In the second chapter, I will sketch my entry into the field and reflect on fieldwork procedures. Against this background, I then analyse the local field dynamics.

The second part, *ACTORS & PRACTICES*, will then take a different entry into the field: interviews with and participant observations of individual bloggers. Starting from ethnographic descriptions of bloggers and production conditions in chapter 3, practices and modes of blog production will then be analysed in chapter 4. Following up on the previous two chapters, I will then conceptualise blogging as practice and analyse its relation to other "media-related" (Hobart 2010: 63) practices in chapter 5. In doing so, I discuss what rewards blogging offers.

The third part, PUBLICNESS, deals with different aspects of blogging that structure the production practice and characterise the modes of publicness in the local field. It is again based on individual bloggers' accounts, while also taking the blog texts into consideration. First, the interplay of audience, language and the production of virtual locality will be discussed in chapter 6. Following that, I will shed light on the ethos of bloggers' in chapter 7, where the various ethical stances within the field will be correlated to come up with a fuller picture of how different actors position themselves. Chapter 8 then analyses how the bloggers negotiate their going and being public, how they position themselves towards the wider public in Lebanon and which issues they put forward. In the conclusion, the various parts will be linked and the findings will be put in the context of broader research fields. Finally, I will reflect on the implications for future research.

In the following, I will situate my study in the wider research environment and outline the main research perspectives on blogs that are relevant for this study. In the subsequent section, I will then discuss the methods and ethical challenges of the project.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES: BLOGS AS MEDIA PRACTICE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A range of disciplinary perspectives and methods has been relevant for this research. Studies in Middle Eastern studies on many kinds of social media in the region provided comparative data and background information. Obviously, media studies and its vast literature on social media in general and on blogging in particular are important references for this study. Besides, there is a wide range of internet studies from a mix of disciplines that did much to help me understand the wider social dynamics of the internet and blogging in particular. Beyond that, recent works in the context of media anthropology, in particular, proved extremely inspiring for my study. Their perspective helped me turn the focus to other aspects of blogging in the Middle East than those hitherto studied. More precisely, I affiliate myself with practice-theory approaches to media in the context of media anthropology (see Bräuchler and Postill 2010). In Rothenbuhler's (2008) sense, media anthropology can be understood as a "field of interdisciplinary contact" between media studies and anthropology, i.e. a field that includes anthropologists who have turned their interest towards media and media scholars who use anthropological concepts or methods. Media anthropology is a field at the crossroads of anthropology, media studies and various regional studies. This triangle of research disciplines and traditions, in this case Middle Eastern Studies as a regional field of study, characterises this book, but also proved to be one of its main challenges. Overall, my research

seeks to contribute to strengthening anthropological approaches in the field of Arab media studies. I inscribe myself in the broader field of media anthropology, and anthropology is where I feel most at home academically.

In the following, I will provide a short overview of the debates relevant to the production of this monograph and will situate my own research. Often, the debates overlap different academic disciplines. The overview also traces my own itinerary of readings in various research fields in search of suitable concepts. The theoretical concepts and approaches I use will be presented in more detail in the three different parts of the book. At this point I intend to give an overview of various research perspectives on blogs.

Uses and ‘produsage’ of blogs – media studies perspectives

In the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, blogging was at the peak of scholarly attention within the wider field of media studies. In 2006, the Australian-based scholar Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs edited *Uses of Blogs*, in which, together with other researchers, they shed light on the different uses of blogs: from “blogs in industries” (Bruns and Jacobs 2006: 9-114) – such as news blogs, business blogs and education blogs – to “blogs in society” (ibid.: 155-210), i.e. political uses of blogs, including gender and subcultural aspects.³² The authors highlight that there is no “blogging *per se*” but different forms and subgenres of blogging (2006: 3), such as personal blogging, news blogging, fictional blogging and *moblogging* (mobile blogging). By looking at its uses instead of defining the blog as a single genre, the volume shows the variety of blogging forms. In a similar vein, Jan Schmidt’s *Weblogs: Eine kommunikationssoziologische Studie* (2006) discusses various aspects of blogging, from personal online journals and their relation to journalism to their role in organisational communication. The study develops a communication-sociological model of analysis for a praxis-oriented theory of blogging concentrating on inherent rules, networks and software. Yet, despite taking a practice approach, his study leaves little room for actual practitioners and their practices and eventually gives the impression that blogging is a complex set of rules and structures.

The term ‘produsage’, coined by Bruns (2007 and 2008), presents a helpful concept in analysing blogs and social media production in general. It designates a new mode of interchangeable production and consumption that “users of collaborative environments” engage in (Bruns 2008: 6). According to Bruns, the blogosphere can be understood as an exemplary “produsage project” that is characterised by a production mode different from that of commercial new production. It does not

32 Another of the key texts on blogging from a Media Studies perspective is Jill Walker Rettberg’s 2008 study of the same title.

envisage a finished artefact, but instead a “gradual improvement of the community’s shared content” (Bruns 2008: 27). The notion of produsage thus helps to understand the specific production practices of blogging. However, Bruns (2008) does not study produsage processes on the micro-level of individual bloggers, which in my view leads to some generalisations that I will discuss when examining specific production processes (chapter 4).

Beyond that, Geert Lovink’s critical (re-)vision of blogging in *Zero comments: Blogging and critical internet culture* (2008a) provides a refreshing and thought-provoking contribution to understanding the media format. Right at the beginning, he points out that “[b]logs zero out centralized meaning structures and focus on personal experiences – not, primarily, news media” (Lovink 2008a: 1). But from his point of view, this does not mean that they necessarily express oppositional interpretations. Lovink criticises that “blogs have been discussed mainly in oppositional terms, as being a counter-voice to the dominant news industry”, though “the blogging majority is conservative” (ibid.). Although his study focuses more on blogging in Western Europe and North America, it is important to keep in mind that blogging is not per se a “counter-voice” (ibid.). Lovink argues against reducing blogs to their relationship with the news media, which supports the approach I follow in this study. Instead, he highlights that “blogging appeals to a wide register of emotions and affects as it mobilizes and legitimizes the personal”, whereas one needs to detect how these affects are mobilised (ibid.: 3). Blogging is thus situated “between online publishing and the intimate sphere of diary keeping” (ibid.: 7). My work tries to do justice to this complexity of blogging as encompassing both the public and private domain.

Analysing ‘non-Western’ media practices: Middle East blogging

What strikes me in most of these prominent contributions from a communication studies perspective is that they are based on data from North America, Australia or Western Europe and thus hardly reflect experiences of blogging in political and social contexts outside these regions. The studies’ focus on the newest and most innovative digital practices and trends also easily let ‘older practices’ fall outside the scope of the studies. These conceptual works on social media just presented are only rarely reflected in studies within the field of Middle Eastern Studies, at least with regard to the publications prior to the ‘Arab uprisings’. Hence, the boundary between media studies and area studies media research is still relatively fixed, and more comparative and combining efforts are needed. *International Blogging*, edited by Adrienne Russell and Nabil Echchaibi in 2009, is a volume that tries to bridge this gap and aims to show the diversity of blogging in a variety of contexts and to address the “uniquely universal-particular and global-local qualities of our vari-

ously digital realities” (Russell et al. 2009: 6). Yet, one of the two contributions dealing with the Middle East by Eugenia Siapera frames, in my view problematically, all blogging in the Middle East as ‘Muslim’ blogging and is preoccupied with a discussion of modernity. The second contribution, by Aziz Douai (2009), concentrates on the “Arab blogosphere’s” political impact on offline politics, which again reflects the predominant focus of Arab media studies. Neither contribution deals with concrete media practices and actors’ experiences.

The first overall survey of blogging in the Arab region was provided in the study “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere” by the Berkman Center for Internet and Democracy in 2009.³³ The report is a quantitative study of the blogosphere based on a large social network analysis. Its main finding relevant for my work was that the blogosphere is organised along national borders with specific linking clusters. The study also provides a useful overview of blogging activities within these different national clusters.³⁴ However, it does not provide insights into the dynamics of the respective localities. Two studies of the Lebanese case need to be mentioned: the first is Haugbolle’s (2007) article on the development of Lebanese blogging in 2005/2006, which traces its early development and provides a critical discourse analysis of Lebanon’s first generation of blogs. The second is Maha Taki’s Ph.D. thesis on *Bloggers and the Blogosphere in Lebanon & Syria: Meanings and Activities* (2010), which covers the period up to 2010. Taki studied in particular the question of the “structural and cultural variables” (ibid.: 5) of blogging (access, censorship), but also shed light on the “meaning and understandings” (ibid.) bloggers attached to their activities. While she also started from an online-offline approach, interviewing bloggers in Lebanon and Syria, she does not follow the actors in an anthropological way as I do. Our studies also differ because my focus is on production practices and on daily life media practices.

Overall, the journal *Arab Media and Society*, established in 2007 (formerly *Television and Broadcasting Studies*) and published by the American University of Cairo and the Kamal Adham Center for Journalism Training and Research, has been the main publication covering the newest trends in Arab media. This journal had the goal of “Reporting a Revolution” (Pintak 2007; see also Hofheinz 2010), starting with satellite television and moving on to social media. The journal reflects the initial hype around blogging in Middle Eastern Studies (Lynch 2007a), when the activities of Egyptian bloggers in 2006 and 2007, in particular, were covered

33 Authored by Bruce Etling, Rob Faris, John Palfrey, Internet and Democracy and John Kelly.

34 However, Arab bloggers, for example from the Syrian blogger Razan Ghazzawi, have also criticised categorising bloggers as either religious or secular, see: <http://razanghazza.wi.com/2009/08/14/berkman-centers-study-of-the-arab-blogphere-map-terminology/>, accessed January 5, 2011.

(Al Malky 2007, Radsch 2008); blogging on the July War in Lebanon 2006 (Haugbolle 2007, Salama 2007) also made the phenomenon popular and led to hope for change. These articles and studies provide comparative data on local conditions of blogging and snapshots of certain moments in the history of Arab blogging. However, the focus in terms of Arab media research objects changed over the period during which my study developed. As Facebook and then Twitter became the new tools attracting attention, blogging was no longer regarded as the great hope for political change. This reflects also a structural problem within the research field. “Stagnation”, as Walter Armbrust (2007: 531) puts it, “is driven, paradoxically, by obsession with the ‘new’”.

The Middle East anthropologist Jon Anderson (2009: n. p.) argues critically against previous research and for a perspective on blogging that looks more closely from a network analysis perspective,

opening up the middle ground between the overwhelming emphasis on agency-enhancement that’s dominated most work on these topics in our region, on the one hand, and, at the other extreme, expansive notions from ‘virtual community’ to the ‘wisdom of crowds’ as general conceptions of what networked communications unleash.

In his programmatic article, Anderson links up to new media research (by boyd; Lovink et al.), rather than to references to the public sphere commonly made in the field of new media research in Middle Eastern Studies. He concludes that networked communication “fosters not Habermas’s idealized public sphere of rational communication (‘speaking truth to power’) but a politics, including cultural politics, that trades on knowing how and showing up” (Anderson 2009: n. p.). Likewise, I intend to go beyond a predominant emphasis on either agency-enhancement or on virtual community, yet with another theoretical approach: not social network analysis, but the field as a domain of practice. Furthermore, in contrast to Anderson, I base my analyses on ethnographic material (interviews and participant observation), as well as an analysis of mediated sociability: data he does not provide, despite his anthropological background.

Public spheres and counter-publics

Blogs have often been discussed in the light of the Habermasian public sphere concept, as Anderson’s quote above indicates. In his article on Arab blogging, Lynch (2007a: 21) argues that the question “whether these blogs can live up to Habermasian ideals of rational-critical discourse is beside the point”. However, studying blogs as *emerging public spheres* or their *impact on the public sphere* have been major research angles, even if in a negative distinction to the Habermasian model.

Furthermore, the main theories of counter-publics that are relevant to my field have to be read against the background of Habermas' study. As I outlined above, my study takes publicness as a conceptual starting point. In order to situate and distinguish my own perspective, however, I will outline the debate around public spheres and counter-publics in the following.

Jürgen Habermas' *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* was first published in 1962.³⁵ The English translation was not published until 1989, and the Anglophone research world replied to it in the 1990s. Habermas conceptualised the public sphere as an "institutionalized form of rational-critical discourse about objects of common concern that could be carried over directly into political discussion" (Calhoun 1992: 13). I do not intend to discuss his concept in detail here,³⁶ but I still would like to mention the key features of the bourgeois public sphere: 1. the idea of being 'inclusive' in principle, which means that everybody who can read could participate; 2. the bracketing of status difference; 3. the discussion of issues hitherto not problematised; and 4. consensus as the telos of the public sphere (see Calhoun 1992). The concept entails normative concepts of inclusiveness, egalitarian access, valuable means and contents, which make it problematic to work with, as I mentioned above (see also Haugbolle 2007). The degree to which Habermas' case study of a bourgeois public sphere is applicable to other contexts and to which the normative components are to be understood as universal has subsequently been questioned. Yet in spite of this criticism, my case study here discusses conditions and social fields of a public, a perspective that is relevant to understanding any form of public.

A critical engagement with Habermas' public sphere concept from a feminist perspective is Nancy Fraser's article "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1992 [1990]). It is probably the most prominent contribution to the theory of counter-publics,³⁷ and several scholars have been working with this concept or extending it.³⁸ Fraser makes a case for a "plurality of competing publics" that counters Habermas' idea of the "singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, its claim to be *the* public arena" (ibid.: 122). She argues for a critical interrogation of his idealised concept, discussing mainly gender and class exclusions. Her argument is that the bourgeois

35 The first edition was followed by several others and a newly revised one in 1990.

36 For a comprehensive overview, see the introduction to the edited volume by Calhoun 1992.

37 For an extended presentation of the 'Begriffsgeschichte' of counterpublics, see Wimmer 2005.

38 The article was published in an edited volume on *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992) in which various scholars provide critical reviews of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere.

public was never *the* public and that “competing counterpublics” existed as women’s public arenas (Fraser 1992: 116). The emphasis in her approach lies on the contesting function of subaltern counter-publics – which is not undisputed. For example, Jodi Dean (2003: 97) criticises that such “publics” are merely groups, because they have special concerns and are partial. Despite their function of “withdrawal and regroupment” (Fraser 1992: 124), Fraser regards these arenas as *publics*, since they have a public orientation and, in their “agitational activities”, are directed toward wider publics (ibid.). Fraser (1992: 123) refers to alternative publics in stratified societies, which my research field in Lebanon certainly is, as:

subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

This definition of a counter-public presupposes that the actors of this public are “subalterns” or “subordinated groups” that formulate “oppositional interpretations” (ibid.) of their own interests – a point I will come back to shortly and then in particular in chapter 8 when applying the notion to my own material. Overall, by arguing for a model of multiple publics that does not contradict the public sphere concept, Fraser’s concept challenges other public sphere theories and theorists and helps thinking beyond the public sphere/ counter-public dichotomy. In my studies of blogging in Lebanon, which is situated in Lebanon’s stratified media landscape, her concept proved to be an important perspective to help go beyond this dichotomous understanding of public dynamics. Moreover, the notion of *counter-public* presents a conceptual approach to studying social media, and blogging in particular, to grasp its oppositional content and direction (Wimmer 2005, Riegert and Ramsay 2011, Jurkiewicz 2011a).

Michael Warner’s “Publics and Counterpublics” (2002) was then useful in analysing my data because his approach sheds light on the participants’ point of view and their self-positioning in relation to the wider public. In his work on queer counter-publics in the last three centuries, he complicates the notion by examining the ways one might be ‘subaltern’. He argues that the reasons why members of a certain public might be regarded as subaltern can differ greatly and that sometimes mere participation in a certain public can make people subaltern (ibid.: 87). Concerning what the public is actually ‘countering’ or addressing, he explains:

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but

to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. (Warner 2002: 86)

In particular, the different modes of address Warner looks at in his article were a valuable perspective for my research project and sensitised me to ways of addressing potential audiences.

Overall, it must be added, neither conceptualisation of counter-publics can simply be applied to the internet and my field of study in particular, since the structures of production and dissemination differ between print and digital media. Wimmer's (2005) discussion of counter-publics then outlines the two dimensions of the term "counter-public sphere" with regard to "alternative media" and new social movements (NSMs):

On the one hand, it refers to critical partial publics aiming to bring their positions – which they feel are being marginalised and which are also often named "counter-public" – to mass media by means of alternative media and actions and therewith gain public attention ("alternative public spheres"). On the other hand, the term counter-public spheres also describes a collective and above all political process of learning and experiencing within alternative forms of organisation as for example NSMs, NGOs etc. ("participatory counter-public spheres"). (Wimmer 2005: 95f)

At the same time, he highlights that "alternative media" complement the mainstream media. The degree to which the local field of blogging I analyse here can be understood as a counter-public is a question that accompanied my research, and I will discuss it at various points in the subsequent chapters.³⁹ Before I turn to the discussions about Middle Eastern publics, I will give a brief overview of the wider discussion on the internet and the public sphere, which reflects some general trends of how the question is dealt with in internet studies.

The internet as public sphere?

The emergence of a new public sphere has been widely hailed in much of internet studies. In *Wealth of Networks*⁴⁰ (2006), Yochai Benkler claims that, through its network architecture, the internet enables new kinds of public discussion and peer production in a wide spectrum of sectors of society. Benkler argues that the internet leads to a "qualitative change in the role of individuals as potential investigators and commentators, as active participants in defining the agenda and debating action

39 See chapter 1.4 and 8 and also Jurkiewicz 2011a.

40 In his book, as already indicated in the term "Wealth" in the title, Benkler enthusiastically describes the changes in social production both from an economic and from a cultural perspective.

in the public sphere” (2006: 225). According to him, “the primary effect of the internet on the public sphere in liberal societies relies on the information and cultural production activity of non-market actors” (ibid.: 220). Although he discusses critically the ‘democratising effect’ of the internet and hints at information overload, fragmentation, polarisation and the possibility of filtering in authoritative regimes (Benkler 2006: 233ff),⁴¹ he defends the claim that the internet can contribute to a more vivid public sphere.

Yet there are also voices more critical that argue that the networked structure of the internet does not encourage different people to discuss with each other, but rather promotes discourse among the likeminded (see Calhoun 1998). Furthermore, the internet’s capacity to create consensus is regarded sceptically. Another claim is that the structure of the internet facilitates commerce, rather than an emerging public sphere. In “Why the Net is not a Public Sphere” (2003), Dean points out that the public sphere is an ideological construct and criticises the self-representation of new media as a democratic public. The extension and intensification of communication, in her argumentation, has not led to democracy but to “communicative capitalism” in which “more domains of life have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle” (ibid.: 102). She further argues that the internet’s “neodemocratic networks are contestatory networks” (ibid.: 109) that contradict the telos of consensus that defines the Habermasian public sphere.

In my opinion, without empirical foundation, the abstract question whether the internet is a public sphere is in danger of drifting into detached ideological discussion. Since it is in concrete contexts, social networks and fields that publics/counter-publics are constituted, case studies can show the variety of publics enabled or possibly constrained through the internet.

Perspectives on Middle East publics

A range of scholars have been involved in studying the dynamics of Arab publics and working with or arguing against the public sphere concept. In 1999, Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson published the first edition of *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Under the banner of “new media”, they summarise novels, cassettes, TV series and internet sites. In the introduction to this edited volume, the authors define “Muslim publics” as characterised by the “new and incredible accessible modes of communication” that lead to “fragmenting and contesting political and religious authorities” (1999: 2). Thus, old asymmetries between senders and receivers and producers and consumers would be reversed (ibid.: 3). They also argue that the significance of place has changed and boundaries are no longer territorial, but contextual and crosscutting (ibid.: 4). New people, new

41 Benkler also mentions the problems of the digital divide, i.e. the uneven distribution of and access to internet facilities, but does not discuss this problematic further.

thinking and a new religious public sphere are outlined as the main aspects of this new trend. Although Anderson later said he had to “plead guilty” to “newism” (2009: n. p.), and calls were made to look at the continuities of media (such as by Armbrust 2007 and 2012), the newness of ‘new media’ in the Middle East, especially within the Arab uprisings, has been highlighted continuously.

Another attempt to grasp the changing Arab public was The Beirut Conference on Public Sphere, held at the American University of Beirut in 2004. Two publications that stem from this conference (Salvatore and LeVine 2005 and Shami 2009) discuss the applicability of the public sphere concept to the Middle Eastern context by analysing historical and contemporary case studies from the region, from cafés and marketplaces to print media and the internet. The edited volume by Shami, referring to Fraser, starts with the hypothesis that, rather than one bourgeois public or one form of political participation in political life, there have been, “a variety of ways of accessing public life and a multiplicity of public arenas” (Shami 2009: 33, citing Fraser 1992). “Therefore analysis now focuses on the multiplicity of publics, on competing publics and on counter-publics” (ibid.: 32f). Publics are understood as processual, “emergent rather than stable units” (ibid.: 33). This contemporary research on Middle East publics goes beyond Habermas’ idea of a public sphere and looks at the emergent, shifting and competing forms of publics. The idea of a ‘dominant’ public is thereby no longer that clear, as publics as well as counter-publics are fluid and contested (see Haugbolle in Shami 2009). These insights were important foundations for my research and helped me think beyond the public sphere concept. Again, I intend to carry forward the discussion in the direction of ‘doing publics’ with a practice-theory approach, for which discussions within media anthropology were an essential input. My last section on research perspectives thus briefly outlines this field of study. The individual approaches and contributions will be discussed in more detail in the respective chapters.

The anthropology of media practices

Anthropology began paying attention to the media as social practice in the late 1980s. Along with an “anthropology of the present” (Fox 1991), anthropologists started to look at global entanglements, in which media became increasingly important. Early media-ethnographic studies analysed media activism and reception in specific local settings (see Ginsburg et al. 2002). Studies of digital media have been conducted since the end of the 1990s, for instance in the pioneer study by Miller and Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000), which I will come back to in the section on methodology.⁴² For this work, the discussion of the

42 See Postill 2011: 20ff and Coleman 2010 for an overview of anthropological internet studies.

theorising of media practice is particularly relevant. Birgit Bräuchler's and John Postill's edited volume *Theorising Media and Practice* (2010)⁴³ reflects the efforts and discussions around practice-theory approaches within the field.⁴⁴ According to Postill (2010a: 12ff), this approach can be made useful in various media anthropological studies, such as of media in everyday life, media and the body, media and production. He defines practices as “embodied sets of activities that humans perform within varying degrees of regularity, competence, and flair” (ibid.: 1). As Nick Couldry argues in the same volume, the concept makes it possible to decentre the text. Instead, a practice-theory approach emphasises the contextualisation of media and sheds light on what people actually do with media (Couldry 2010: 35-54). Furthermore, as Hobart argues in the same volume (2010: 69), “potentially it avoids the ethnocentric closure that bedevils media studies”. There are different stances within media anthropology on what practice theory implies in detail, from the suggestion that certain media practices may anchor other practices (Couldry 2010: 47ff) to the call to look at media-related practices (Hobart 2010), which I refer to in conceptualising blogging as practice in chapter 5. Overall, it can still be stated that media anthropology is essentially tied to practice concepts and pledges to look at “contextual fields” (Spitulnik 2010: 107).

Against the background of the various research fields and academic traditions that I considered for my research, my study is to be understood as a case study of media production in an anthropological vein, which involves a thorough analysis of the practices of blog production in the Lebanese context. In the following, I outline the methods I used for my study and the material I gathered. I will also discuss the ethical challenges I encountered during my fieldwork. In chapter 2.1, I will then provide a more detailed analysis of fieldwork procedures and my role in the field.

METHODS AND ETHICS OFF- AND ONLINE

When talking with other researchers and with non-academics about doing a study on blogging in Lebanon, I was often confronted with the question why I needed to go ‘there’, since everything is already online. A practice-theory approach, however, requires the study of practices in their local and material context, and thus fieldwork offline is indispensable. On the whole, there are self-evidently divergent strategies for studying the internet ethnographically. Which methodology is best

43 The volume originated in a Media Anthropology Workshop within the EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists) in Bristol, 2006.

44 For more details, see the introduction to part II and chapter 5.

suites is discussed intensively and I do not intend to cover them here in detail,⁴⁵ but I will mention two prominent contributions reflecting two research strategies.

The first is Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), in which she analyses a media event as virtual object by doing research exclusively online. The focus of her study is on the internet as culture and cultural artefact. Hine argues that the "ethnography of the internet does not necessarily involve physical travel", but involves travel "by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining" (Hine 2000: 45).⁴⁶ Yet, she does not claim that exclusively online research is suited to all research endeavours. On the other side of the spectrum of ethnographic approaches in internet studies, Miller and Slater's *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000) analyses internet use in Trinidad. In their fieldwork, Miller and Slater focus on concrete sites, such as home, workplace and internet cafés, and show how the internet is not apart from but very much part of everyday life and thus cannot be studied separately. Axel (2006: 365f) criticises Miller and Slater's "championing of the traditional", i.e. fieldwork in a traditional ethnographic sense, as "somehow extreme". Nonetheless, he acknowledges their contribution in extending "the limits of normativity of a certain discursive formation that conditions ethnographic approaches to the study of new technologies of communication" (ibid.: 365f).

Hine's approach and findings are very useful in the study of online activity. In general, however, I would argue that conducting ethnography of the internet purely online entails the risk of privileging the textual over other modes of analysis. This fits Borneman's and Hammoudi's (2009) criticism of textualism in anthropology and the demise of fieldwork within the discipline. He criticises anthropological media studies, amongst other things, for often dealing only with media texts, as a substitute for fieldwork in the Malinowskian sense (ibid.: 9). An ethnographic approach to the internet like Miller and Slater's, in contrast, privileges the uses of and practices 'around the internet'. In sum, which approach is suitable depends very much on the research question and theoretical orientation. The possibilities of access are self-evidently crucial, as well. A combination, i.e. being there on- and offline, promises to be the most fruitful approach, since digital media practices form an online-offline continuum. By focusing solely on the online realm, one fails to perceive these continuities.

45 As can be seen in the debates in the EASA Media Anthropology Network, see E-seminar 7 on "Researching the Internet" in 2005 (http://www.media-anthropology.net/braeuchler_eseminar.pdf) and e-seminar 38 "From cyber to digital anthropology to an anthropology of the contemporary?" with an article by Philipp Budka, 2011 (http://www.media-anthropology.net/file/budka_eseminar.pdf), both accessed February 18, 2012.

46 Hine's second quotation, "you travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining", is from Burnett 1996: 68.

Corresponding with my research interests in the context and practices of blog production and the dynamics within the field of blogging, ‘being there’, in the sense of doing fieldwork in the local context, was an important part of my research. Learning about blog production practices solely by conducting online research was less valuable, since I was not interested only in what bloggers wrote, but primarily in the practices and media uses around blogging. Besides, to get a sense of the place and the social and political context, as well as strengthening my language skills in the Lebanese dialect, I consider my extended stays in Lebanon to have been indispensable for my research project.

Changes in the research project

Initially I had started the project with the aim of comparing the Lebanese and the Egyptian blogosphere. But after the end of my first fieldwork in Beirut (in spring 2010), I realised that although a shift of the fieldwork location would broaden the study, I might lose focus and depth. I would have to deal with two Arabic dialects and two localities and to follow the developments of two dynamic blogospheres; whereby the Egyptian one is especially huge (see chapter 1.3). In short, I realised I would not have enough time to do both in the three-year framework of my funding. Thus, I decided to concentrate on the Lebanese case in order to follow up on the Lebanese actors over a longer time. Being in one locality instead of doing multi-sited ethnography somehow seemed old-fashioned, in particular when it came to translocal media spheres. However, I also consider this choice more promising for understanding the local dynamics (Miller and Slater 2000). On the whole, I found myself privileging offline over online fieldwork. First, this is due to the fact that in a lot of studies, in particular on the Middle Eastern internet, the online realm is already overexposed (see above), and I chose to resist this trend. Beyond that, to realise the practice approach, interviewing and following bloggers in their daily lives ‘offline’ was essential.

Field trips

My first field trip to Lebanon was from the end of October 2009 to the end of March 2010; my second, shorter, follow-up research was during March and April 2011. I thus spent seven months in Lebanon, which would have been worth extending, but that would also have made it more difficult to keep the set time frame. During my first stay in Lebanon, I initially concentrated on attending any social media events and on meeting bloggers for interviews. I contacted them by mail, by leaving a comment on their blog, or personally when I met them at an event. Events where I could meet bloggers included a discussion about “Blogs that became books” at the Salon du Livre, the French Book Fair in Beirut in November

2009; the Arab Bloggers Meeting in Beirut (December 8-12, 2009); and some of the social media gatherings in Beirut organised by the Social Media Exchange initiative (SMEX) and others. I also followed bloggers to training sessions on how to blog that were held in Beirut or outside the capital, and I met them at demonstrations and other social and political occasions, mostly in central Beirut. I was lucky to be in Beirut when some bloggers were initiating the Lebloggers, a Lebanese bloggers' association, and to be allowed to take part in some of their meetings. Along with a range of informal talks during this first stay, I conducted interviews with about twenty bloggers (seventeen Lebanese and five Egyptian bloggers; I met the latter during the Arab Bloggers Meeting) in English, Arabic and French.⁴⁷ I conducted semi-structured interviews, i.e. following a catalogue of questions, but at the same time being open to what the bloggers thought 'really mattered'. Furthermore, I interviewed other actors in the field of social media, such as the SMEX Beirut director. "Being there" (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) allowed me not only to meet the bloggers in their life context, but also to participate in some of the community's events and become part of the field, at least to a certain degree.⁴⁸

During my second stay in Beirut, I then focused on eight case studies that I had chosen among the various bloggers I had already met and interviewed during my first stay. My focus on the context of blog production had become clearer by the time I came back to Beirut. In order to 'decentre the text' and contextualise the blogging practice more fully, I relied on being able to meet the bloggers again and to visit them at their work place or home or in other social contexts. Although I already knew the bloggers in my sample better and had met with them several times (the interview, the Lebloggers meetings and diverse social and political events), the follow-up research proved to be more challenging than I had imagined and was in part quite frustrating. All the bloggers seemed to be extremely busy with at least two (part-time or freelance) jobs. Beyond that, I met those whom I had the most access to, on several occasions and in several places, such as their work place, demonstrations, in their spare time with other friends in cafés and bars, their homes and other places.

Choice of case studies

While in the beginning of my project I focused on 'alternative content online', taking blogs as one such phenomenon, the 'political blogs' were in my initial grid. I excluded blogs that focussed merely on fashion, technology, design, cooking or the like. However, I slowly broadened my scope, as the category of political blogs did

47 For more on language, see chapter 2.1.

48 I reflect in more detail on my role in the field in chapter 2.1.

not fit the fluidity of genres between political and personal blogging I observed in the field. Moreover, the bloggers I encountered were reluctant to associate themselves with any single category. When I asked one of the bloggers in my sample how he would describe his blog, he answered:

I don't know. I try to... before I came here I knew that you would ask this question, and I was asked this question before and I never know how to describe it with one phrase, I don't answer: it's a political blog or a personal blog. [...] Some bloggers prefer to focus on one theme like politics or religion or personal stuff because they talk to a specific audience, but I cannot just write politics. (Adon i1)⁴⁹

This stance was also reflected by other bloggers who rejected being put in the category of political blogging and saw their blogging as more flexible. This shows that bloggers themselves do not necessarily perceive themselves as belonging to one of the established blogging 'genres'. Beyond that, as also Taki (2010: 151) outlines, bloggers may change their blog topics over time. The blogs in the local field I focused on are characterised by the combination of both political and personal blogging – an amalgam of political commentary, personal observations, poems and drawings.

Of the 17 bloggers I interviewed during my first fieldwork, I chose eight as my main case studies. It was these eight that I concentrated on in my second fieldwork in spring 2011. My criteria for selection were that they were (still) intensively blogging, i.e. once a week at least, that their blog was an individual, single-author blog and that they were linked and embedded within the local field of blogging.⁵⁰ In addition, I sought to build a sample that represented a diversity of languages and writing styles, such as English and Arabic, and within the latter standard and colloquial Arabic, as well as research-like, journalistic and activist writing styles and forms of artistic expression. Another criterion was obviously accessibility, i.e. their willingness and ability to meet me for a follow-up interview. Of the eight bloggers in my sample before my second fieldwork, there was one blogger I could not meet for a second time for an informal talk or interview, and I therefore excluded him from the main sample. So my main sample consists of seven bloggers, of whom five are male and two female.⁵¹ The sample represents the main

49 Interview with Adon (*Ninar*) on February 9, 2010, Beirut. In the following, for bloggers from my main sample, I will use a simplified reference system for the interviews integrated in the text (i1 = interview 1, for a list of interviews see the appendix).

50 Riegert and Ramsay's (2011) findings and in particular their linking analysis of Lebanese bloggers helped me confirm my selection, see below.

51 According to the Berkman study (Etling et al. 2009), one-third of the Lebanese cluster consists of female bloggers.

groups within the local field of blogging in terms of professional backgrounds: young politically engaged journalists, IT professionals and designers.

My study consequently concentrates on a few individuals in the local field of blogging and, as I will show, in part a loose group of friends. From my point of view, it is exactly this closeness to specific actors that can provide a rich insight into the internal dynamics of the local field of blogging, which is also based on close ties offline. Beyond that, the ethnographic take on production conditions and practices justifies concentration on a small sample of bloggers. The advantage of intensive case studies lies in the in-depth insights they provide. These cases have value as examples in contrast to ‘representative’ samples that try to cover a whole field and hence are inevitably less deep.

After I had chosen my case studies, I came to know that my sample bears a close resemblance to the sample of a Swedish research team led by Kristina Riegert and Gail Ramsay. They followed a quantitative approach to choosing the ten most popular bloggers of various Arabic countries, whether writing from the respective country or the diaspora. Their criteria were to pick the popular, i.e. the most-visited and most-linked blogs (Ramsay and Riegert 2011).⁵² All of the local Lebanese bloggers in their sample were included in my initial sample as well.⁵³ Thus, although I chose a qualitative approach, I also selected the same ‘main’ bloggers in Lebanon – in terms of visitors and connectedness – by spending time in the field on- and offline. Neither their sample nor mine captures the whole diversity of what is called the Lebanese blogosphere; they are to be understood as snapshots within the temporary and fluid sphere of blogging.

Online research

‘Being there’ in the sense of being online and following blogs, the bloggers’ tweeting activities and other online practices was also an important method for my research, without which I could not have grasped the dynamics of blogging. A typical research day in Oslo and Berlin started with reading the daily press roundup offered on the news website NOW Lebanon;⁵⁴ after that, I took a look at the

52 Their sample includes *The Angry Arab News Network*, *Plus961*, *Maya’s Amalgam*, *Qifa Nabki*, *From Beirut with Funk* (former *Independence05*), *Hummus Nation*, *Trella*, *Ninar*, *Beirutiyat* and *Hannibaael*. While *The Angry Arab News Network*, *Qifa Nabki* and *Hummus Nation* are written from the diaspora, the others are written by bloggers based in Lebanon.

53 Khodor (aka Jou3an) is additionally included in my sample.

54 An al-Hariri-funded online news site, to be found at: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en>. The press roundup provides English translations from the four Lebanese newspapers *An-Nahar*, *Al-Akhbar*, *As-Safir* and *Ad-Diyar*.

Lebanese blog aggregator⁵⁵ and then checked what the bloggers in my sample had published; I followed them by means of a Google Reader subscription to their blogs.⁵⁶ This led to following up on links they posted or articles they referred to. I also followed the actors on Twitter, not continuously – since it simply would have kept me from doing anything else – but rather by random sampling and in relation to particular political events such as the municipal elections 2010 and during the events of spring 2011. During my fieldwork in Beirut, I also followed a similar online research schedule to the degree that the electricity and internet connections allowed.

Last but not least, Facebook became an indispensable research tool for following a wide spectrum of the bloggers' activities. I usually sent a friend request to the blogger I had met for an interview, or he or she asked me during the interview whether I was on Facebook and told me to 'add' him or her. During my fieldwork in Beirut, Facebook gave me at least an indication of political or cultural events they would probably attend and allowed me to visit the same events as well. To a certain degree, Facebook also allowed me to follow what else was going on in their lives. Although they were aware that I saw their Facebook activities and also had access to my profile, this nevertheless left me with the feeling of 'spying' on them, especially since some of them did not seem to employ any privacy settings and as I guessed were in general less aware of others scanning their content. I will return to how I dealt with this in the next section "Ethical dilemmas".

'Being there' online on the various platforms the bloggers used and following the links they posted also meant occasionally getting lost online and having to deal with huge amounts of data. I used Zotero, a Firefox application, to save my online data and tagged it according to the categories that I also used for my offline fieldwork data. At least I tried to synchronise the tags of my online and offline data, which was difficult at times due to the huge amount of data.

Material and analysis

My material thus consists of interview transcriptions (see the appendix for an overview of the interviews), fieldwork notes summarising material generated during 'participant observation', blog entries and other online material such as Tweets (Twitter entries) and diverse online articles. With this corpus of data, I worked in part inspired by the "grounded theory" approach of Strauss and Glaser (1967) that aims at generating theory from data in the process of research. Hammersly and Atkinson (2007: 166ff) describe this approach as more "activity than procedure"; by closely reading the data, one tries to develop fruitful concepts

55 <http://www.lebanonaggregator.org>

56 Longer Arabic articles were printed out, and I scheduled time for thorough reading at a later point during the day or the week. (See more on my language skills in chapter 2.1).

and theory. However, I did not employ this quite ambitious method strictly, but only for parts of the material. I read and reread the material, coded and re-coded along the lines of the focus of my study. At the same time, I was searching for concepts that could be useful for my research, from the public sphere and counter-publics to the field as a domain of practice, as I outlined in the beginning. The process was thus twofold, rather than purely generating theory out of the data.

I will reflect on the methodologies and challenges of my approach at different points in this book and in particular in chapter 2.1. The critical assessment of the methods used cannot be confined to a short outline in the introduction, as it structured the production of my research on various levels. Or as another media researcher put it, “methodological considerations...must be an integral part of [the] argument” (Skrubbeltrang 2011: n. p.). As I deal with the production conditions of blogs, I also intend to be as transparent as possible about the context of the production of this research (see 2.1).

Ethical dilemmas: Anonymity, privacy and confidentiality

Anonymity is “a key ethical concept” in qualitative research (Tilley and Woodthorpe 2011: 198) and also part of the anthropological endeavour, which always “involves making things public that were said or done in private” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 212). The anonymisation of the research’s participants is primarily used to protect them and ensure that confidentiality is maintained. However, as Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011: 6) outline, this “orthodoxy” has been questioned in recent years. These authors argue that the principle of anonymity cannot be applied universally. In particular fields of research, participants might want to be identified, researchers may be accountable to funders and, in interdisciplinary studies, differing standards about anonymity can conflict. Furthermore, instead of protecting the participant, “upholding the principle of anonymity could actually serve to underdetermine the researcher and/or participants’ autonomy” (ibid.: 200). How to protect the informant’s privacy in internet research is an open discussion and, due to the dynamised field, will probably continue to be so in the future. Sveningsson Elm (2009: 71f) adds for consideration that guidelines for research ethics cannot always be simply transferred to the online research environment, but must be revised.⁵⁷ Beyond that, as she argues, when it comes to online data, the perception of the users must be taken into consideration.

In my field of study, the choice whether and how to maintain the anonymity of my participants was a tricky one. On the one hand, part of the material I gathered is publicly available online, and in most cases the blogger’s full name is indicated or

57 In the same article, she summarises the Association of Internet Researchers’ efforts to develop ethical guidelines for internet research (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 72).

can easily be tracked – for example through links to interviews they gave in which their full name was mentioned. At least what they published online was perceived as public by them, and thus I did not see the need to anonymise. Furthermore, in academic literature on blogging in the Middle East,⁵⁸ it is common to give the links of the posts under study, so full anonymity did not seem to be the right approach. I also want to give credit to the bloggers' writings. On the other hand, I felt the need to protect my participants, in particular in regard to the offline data I acquired in meetings, interviews and at times personal informal talks when hanging out together. Since I also used other online data not gleaned from the blogs, the anonymity issue became even more complex. Especially when it comes to Facebook, a social network in which the private and public are to be understood as continuous, it is even more difficult to apply research ethics. On Facebook I followed the bloggers' daily postings, read their at times personal entries and saw pictures of them at parties and other events that I could only access by 'friending' the bloggers on this social network. They potentially knew I could read their Facebook 'timelines', since they accepted my friend request (or I accepted theirs), but no formal agreement was made that I could use this as material for my research. Furthermore, as I indicated above, privacy settings were not employed very much. It needs to be mentioned here, however, that most of the bloggers in my sample use their Facebook profiles as a semi-public platform and most have hundreds and sometimes even thousands of 'friends'. Facebook served as an important tool for spreading new blog posts and connecting to other bloggers also beyond Lebanon.

My initial pragmatic decision on the articles I published during my research was to use the blogger's full name only if it was indicated on his or her blog; if a blogger was anonymous on her or his blog, regardless of whether I knew their real identity or not, I decided that their anonymity should be preserved. However, almost none of the bloggers in my final sample had anonymised their identity on their blogs, which in consequence means that my study is for the most part about named bloggers. In addition, I felt the bloggers' implicit expectation that I would publish my findings and also give credit to their blogging activity. Given that the bloggers in my sample publish online and try to promote their writings, they saw my work as an additional 'marketing' of the Lebanese blogosphere and their respective blogs. For example, during my second fieldwork, several bloggers asked me whether I had finally published something and made use of the interviews they gave me, which shows their expectations of reciprocity.

Some researchers argue in favour of letting the research participants choose whether they want their identities to be disclosed (see Giordano et al. 2007). But this is not an easy way out of the dilemma. In my case, the bloggers I met and inter-

58 This applies also to the Lebanese case in particular, see Riegert and Ramsay 2011, who have a sample of Lebanese blogs more or less similar to mine.

viewed were all aware that I would use the recorded interviews in relation to their blogs and thus their names for my publications. At times a blogger might make comments like “this is off the record” or ask me to stop recording when he was talking about a critical topic, which shows their awareness of possible consequences. However, I wonder whether even those with social science experience were fully aware of how my writings would use the interviews and in particular the notes from observations in informal settings.⁵⁹ I would argue that ‘simply’ leaving the choice to the participants surrenders part of the researcher’s responsibility.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, I decided not to anonymise the participants in my study, but to refer to them by their online names, which in some cases are their real names and in others only a nickname offline or a name created solely for online activities. I hope thereby to acknowledge the work they do online and, at the same time, not to invade what they might understand as their ‘offline privacy’ when it comes to the material I included from my observations and informal talks. Nevertheless, since anonymity is not to be conflated with confidentiality, I very much try to guard the latter as much as possible. In certain paragraphs that touch upon sensitive issues, such as internal group conflicts, I have consequently chosen not to ascribe the quotes to specific persons (see chapter 2.2 and 7.1), but rather to outline general strands in the discussion I want to cover. In these cases, the quotes stem either from observations in discussion rounds or from personal comments made outside interview situations. I decided not to include my Facebook data in this text, but only use it as a research tool for connecting and communicating with bloggers.

59 Some of the bloggers of my main sample have read parts of my writings. So far, they have raised no concerns about the way they are being represented. However, I felt they were not particularly concerned about being represented in academic publications as such, which are public in quite some different way than their blogs and target another audience.