Introduction

In the widespread hyperventilation about the role of media in the Arab uprisings, journalists, academics and bloggers have endowed, in turn, Facebook, Twitter, Al-Jazeera, YouTube and hip-hop with magical powers. Mythologized, digital media have also been personalized, as if they embodied human agency without humans. The belief in the centrality of media gadgetry in social and political change in the Middle East, as I have argued elsewhere, can be traced back to Daniel Lerner’s *Passing of Traditional Society*, with his notion of communication-enabled “psychic mobility” moving people across a tri-chotomy of Traditionalist, Transitionalist, Modernist in order to reach the promised land of Western modernity, characterized as much by the ability to own and consume things than by any other social value. The media-centrism of these discourses puts “new” media at the heart of the elaboration of modernity.

This technological determinism articulates a presentism that sees the deployment of media in the revolution as “unique” and “unprecedented,” creating a technological-fetish for the new - when in fact several revolutions in the Middle East during the past century saw historically equivalent patterns of media use, from the 1919 Egyptian revolution to the 1979 Iranian revolution. This deeply problematic nexus of determinism and presentism creates what I have called Plato’s Digital Cave, where images of shadows projected on the wall - think arbitrary tweets, faceless Facebook posts, nameless blogs, concocted videos, shady informers - are mistaken as reality and embedded into one’s version of that reality. The ability of information to travel long distances in very little time, traveling in the form of digital bits and packets, seems to have enabled observers to indulge in the illusion that they were witnesses to raw events, when in fact they were accessing the uprisings through always complex, often contrived and strategically woven narratives.

1 Daniel Lerner: *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, Glencoe, 1952.
2 Marwan M. Kraidy: *Plato’s Digital Cave: The Arab Uprisings as Battles of Representation*, Edward Said Lecture, American University of Beirut, Beirut, February 2012. A previous version was presented on a closing plenary session of the International Association of Media and Communication Research, Istanbul, Turkey, July 2011.
As one of the oldest means of expression recorded in history, graffiti matter-of-factly undercuts the nexus of technological determinism and presentism. Whether we consider the forefathers of graffiti the cave wall scribbling of the Neanderthal, or we fast forward to the contemporary era to the walls of New York City and Philadelphia, or wartime Beirut, both in the 1970s, contemporary graffiti can be said to be everything but "unprecedented." Formally, graffiti still consist of paint on walls, even if nowadays paint comes out of spray cans, walls are made of metal, plastic or concrete, and graffiti enjoy additional longevity and visibility in the digital sphere. In addition, graffiti present a formidable epistemological challenge. As inkblots on city walls, themselves often anonymous, fought by business owners and security services, graffiti are difficult to track and document; they require local knowledge and a quotidian haunting of the street where stencils are printed, subverted, deformed, erased and restored; where they disappear from one site only to multiply in others; fade away from walls to linger on blogs and Facebook pages. This combination of local concreteness and ephemerality, rendered at once more acute and more diffuse by the advent of the Internet as a repository of graffiti, raises several questions about this medium.

Graffiti are ubiquitous, though not particularly new, in contemporary Beirut. Throughout its history, Lebanon has been a small and politically fractured country that is greatly affected by political and social turmoil anywhere in neighbouring countries. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Beirut was an ideological crossroads, as exiled activists, dissident intellectuals and a motley crew of Arab political migrants made it their home and their platform. The city is also closely associated with conflict, having experienced multiple upheavals, the longest and most devastating being the 1975-1990 Civil War.

During that war, graffiti served as territorial markers for the warlord-dominated, militia-enforced enclaves, echoing Ley and Cybriwsky’s findings nearly four decades ago that as markers of territory graffiti reflected space ownership and promoted "introspective self-consciousness" in neighbourhoods. For locals, a glance at the scribbling on the wall informed them who was in charge of the neighbourhood. As Maria Chakhtoura documented in La Guerre des Graffiti: Liban 1975-1977 (1978), Beirut in the early war years was awash with a rich array of stencil graffiti depicting logos of various Lebanese and Palestinian political parties and militias, in addition to free form, Arabic language graffiti expressing various ideological opinions. The proliferation of graffiti advocating myriad ideological, party and militia positions mirrored the mushrooming of wartime radio and television stations. Both city walls

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and airwaves reflected a deeply fragmented, radically pluralistic, and profoundly polarized public discourse. After the war, as wartime graffiti were cleaned up when Solidère took over Beirut's central district, the political class carved Lebanon's television landscape according to sectarian lines while sapping public television. Before the war, there was one public broadcaster, with two channels. During the war, television stations proliferated, reflecting the country's increasing political and sectarian fragmentation. The 1994 Audio-Visual Media Law, which resulted from discussions on how to reorganize the post-war media system within the framework of the Taif Agreement, revoked the monopoly of Télé-Liban, a unique hybrid entity owned 51% by the state and 49% by private capital, and gave four licenses: one to Future TV (Hariri, Sunni), one to NBN (Berri, Shii), one to LBC (Daher, Maronite), and one to MTV (Murr, Orthodox and Druze). Though other stations emerged, like Hezbollah's Al-Manar and New TV, the erstwhile organ of the Lebanese Communist Party, the television system, like other media, economic, political and culture resources, continued to operate via this sectarian formula. The importance of graffiti is its ability to carry messages that, because of their radicalism or marginality, would never appear in mainstream media, especially in a system divided into sectarian media enclaves. As Tsilimpounidi and Walsh wrote about graffiti during and after the 2008 riots in Athens, Greece, "Athens is screaming through its walls everything that is not otherwise expressed and remains invisible in the mass media."\(^5\)

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The nature of graffiti changed in the post-war years. As Salti wrote, "The content is different, but also purpose, interlocution, interpellation, dissemination, scope and quantity."\(^7\) Post-war graffiti reflected fundamental changes in Lebanese political and social life as Syrian hegemony over Lebanon was consecrated, municipal elections were reinstated, free market economics reigned supreme, and tourists and investors from the Gulf monarchies and the Lebanese diaspora were assiduously courted. Whereas wartime graffiti was consumed by ideological and political conflict between groups, post-war graffiti ventured into issues of sexuality, equality, civic participation, and what I would generally characterise as new left campaigns militating, for example, for women's rights, lowering the voting age, gay rights, the reopening of the Beirut Forest to citizens, and especially against sectarianism.

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In the decade leading to the Arab uprisings, there has been a proliferation of graffiti about media.


\(^6\) Myrto Tsilimpounidi/Aylwyn Walsh: Painting human rights: Mapping street art in Athens: Journal of Arts and Communities 2 (2) (2010), 111-122, here: 114

Stencilled and free-style wall inscriptions featured commentary and criticism about graffiti, television, photography, the Internet, film, leading to comments about Twitter and Facebook as the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt got underway and seemingly metastasized to Libya, Bahrain, and Syria. This paper explores Beirut graffiti about media as unique spaces for discourse that are at once separate from the media environment and yet, by commenting and criticizing other media, are also connected to that media ecosystem. I collected these pictures in Beirut between June 2011 and August 2012, on daily walks hunting and documenting the colours, shapes, styles and messages covering city walls. This exploratory article, which begins to analyse a massive photographic graffiti data set, poses straightforward questions, to be addressed in no particular order: How do graffiti reflect on, raise questions about, and put forth critiques of other media in Lebanon and the Arab world? What do these graffiti about media tell us about how power and representation operate, and how competing political and cultural narratives circulate? Most importantly, what is the best way to understand and theorize graffiti’s dual role as at once part of Beirut’s media ecology but also distinct and relatively autonomous from that environment? With the latter question in mind, and before we get to specific graffiti about media, it is necessary to begin elaborating a theoretical framework than enables an understanding of Beirut graffiti’s status vis-à-vis other media.

Graffiti as Heterotopia?

As a site of intersection of different social domains across national and cultural boundaries, this paper proposes that graffiti and the ways in which they relate to other media and society at large, can be understood as heterotopia. In a rather enigmatic lecture delivered in March 1967 and published posthumously in 1984 in French and in 1986 in English as an essay titled "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault develops his notion of heterotopia, or other space.6 "We are," Foucault writes, "in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side … We are at a moment when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."7 Foucault concludes that "[O]ur epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites."8 Contemporary life, he says, is experienced in terms of connections between different social spaces. Every society, Foucault writes, has places that are "outside of all places" and that are "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about … heterotopia."9

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6 Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces, Diacritics 22-27 (1986).
7 Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces (see FN 8), 22.
8 Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces (see FN 8), 23.
9 Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces (see FN 8), 24.
Foucault offers six defining principles of heterotopia. The first principle holds that heterotopias exist in all societies; the second that each heterotopia has a "precise and determined function" that nonetheless changes over time; the third that heterotopia are capable of "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible"; the fourth that heterotopia are "most often linked to slices in time," the fifth that heterotopias have different rules of access, with some more open than others that require rites of passage; the sixth trait of heterotopias, according to Foucault, is that "they have a function in relation to all the space that remains," which has a twofold manifestation of establishing distinguishable cultural spaces while reflecting broad social orders outside of those spaces. The latter function, this article endeavours to demonstrate, is especially applicable to the graffiti under study.

A starting point to exploring graffiti as heterotopia is to consider graffiti as a somewhat autonomous medium of expression in the broader media environment. Rare exceptions notwithstanding, the Lebanese media system parallels the country's political sectarian structure. In addition, because the Lebanese media environment is advertising-supported, commercial considerations mix with political calculus. However unstable, this political-commercial articulation functions as a double co-optation in favour of the status quo. Activists trying to break through to the public sphere have used both online tools, from blogs to social media, and graffiti. Though both the online world and city walls are also subject to the disciplinary power of the political-commercial nexus, they remain relatively autonomous for prevailing political and economic forces.

It is this relative autonomy that enables a consideration of graffiti as heterotopia within the Lebanese media system. The fact that many graffiti on Beirut walls comment on, address, criticize, satirize, or subvert other media - including graffiti itself - is the empirical fait accompli that warrants the consideration of graffiti as heterotopia within Lebanon's sphere of media and cultural representation. Moreover, Beirut has been a relatively stable capital city at a time when other Arab capitals convulse to the rhythms of the Arab uprisings, whether it is a chaotic struggle for power after the fall of the regime in Egypt or a bloody civil war between an entrenched regime and armed rebels in Syria. As such, Beirut has seen an abundance of Arab uprisings graffiti, especially but not solely from the ongoing Syrian rebellion. Though it would be a stretch to call Beirut heterotopic in the context of the Arab uprisings, the Lebanese capital, by hosting on its walls critiques of unfolding political struggles elsewhere in the Arab world, does nonetheless present heterotopic features. But before we go further, what formal characteristic(s) allow graffiti to play a heterotopic role? In the following section, an argument is put forth

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12 Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces (see FN 8), 27.
that graffiti’s generic hybridity is at the heart of graffiti’s consideration as heterotopia.

Graffiti as an Impure Genre

Graffiti, as Nestor García-Canclini put it in his famous book *Cultururas Híbridas*, is an impure genre.⁵³

Stylistically and socially hybrid, graffiti is difficult to define. As Brighenti explains:

"Graffiti writing is a field whose definition is problematic for a number of reasons… it is difficult to identify its boundaries. Writing interacts and often overlaps and interweaves with the fields of other practices … including art and design (as aesthetic work), criminal law (as vandalism crime), politics (as a message of resistance and liberation), and market (as merchandisable product). Because no official and universally agreed-on definitions of all these boundaries exist, writing appears as an interstitial practice … a practice about whose definitions and boundaries different social actors hold inevitably different conceptions … writing seems to be located precisely in a residuum of one of those fields."⁴⁴

Multiple contexts, geographical, social and interpretive, therefore play a role in determining how graffiti are understood, i.e. from which residuum they are to be comprehended. As a result of this impurity, graffiti is not easily absorbed in any formal or generic category (art, crime, merchandise), and as such remains a stubbornly autonomous - or semi-autonomous - space that relates to other spaces without integrating any of them: graffiti as heterotopia.

Another source of impurity resides in graffiti’s dialogical nature. Bakhtin’s basic definition of dialogism as "the necessary relation of any utterance to other utterances" applies to graffiti.⁵⁵ The term "intertextuality" was Kristeva’s translation of "dialogism," and for the purposes of this article the two terms are synonymous.⁶⁶ In one of the very earliest academic treatments of graffiti, Paul McGlynn, writing in 1972 in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, compared graffiti to slogans:

"Graffiti and slogans are interrelated forms in that the latter are merely a sentimental, that is self-conscious, version of the former. One should begin any investigation with graffiti, however, because essentially we can consider them the purer substance, if purity is indeed

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the proper word, and in due course we can proceed to the matter of slogans."

In McGlynn’s view, graffiti is pure, an unadulterated version of slogans. This argument is understandable, as McGlynn was writing at a time when graffiti was still a recent phenomenon, and had not yet been appropriated by the advertising industry and other economic, social and cultural realms. McGlynn clearly understands graffiti as a monological genre. In his own words:

"A graffito is a pronouncement, an utterance, a proclamation. And the rhetoric of graffiti is impersonal, cryptic, oracular. They are rhetorically removed from the obligations of debate, the abrasions of conversation, and the circumscriptions of social personality. The rhetoric is final and unimpeachable, in a word secure … ."

In fact, graffiti is a highly intertextual, dialogical form. As this article will strive to demonstrate, graffiti’s dialogism is manifest across several registers in graffiti about media. This dialogism is critical to graffiti’s fulfilment of Foucault’s last, and for the sake of this article most important, principle of heterotopia: their ability to act as distinct cultural spaces that nonetheless reflect external and broader social forces.

**Graffiti and Intertextual Allusions to Other Media**

Beirut graffiti about media vary in style, message, and mode of address. Some simply invoke various media forms. These include, for example, a stencil, found mostly in Ras Beirut but also in Ashrafiyeh, that consists simply of the words "8 mm" in italics.

"8 mm". Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

Whereas the "8 mm" stencil merely refers to a type of film that is no longer widely in use, therefore

18 Paul McGlynn Graffiti and Slogans (see FN 17), 353.
embodying an intertextual allusion to another medium, in this case film, another stencil, found mostly in Ras Beirut (but apparently also in Cairo), features a classic-looking camera with the word intaj, meaning "production," written underneath it.

By arranging a reflex camera and the caption underneath it, this stencil creates tension between an inanimate media technology object (the camera) and a process of communication or creation (intaj, or production), perhaps to underscore the point that any act of communication is itself a construction. Here we begin to see how graffiti enact a critical perspective on other media.

Decoding Intratextual Graffiti

One of the most interesting category of graffiti about media consists of graffiti-about-graffiti, a self-referential form that embodies intratextuality. As we shall see, these graffiti establish intratextual links with themselves as graffiti and intertextual links with other media, whether by directly commenting on or indirectly invoking television, photography, or the Internet, or by aesthetically infusing other media, such as, for example, music videos. Intratextuality reflects that graffiti is a self-reflexive form. Indeed, graffiti is a deictic sign - i.e. a sign whose meaning requires contextual information, "whose self-pointing gesture is its most significant attribute. Graffiti is an act of pointing to itself, an act of calling attention to self while designating specific place as well as indexing its environ and authority of the writer."19 Self-referential Beirut graffiti include several stencils and free style graffiti, all in English.

One graffiti features a textual inscription, "If Graffiti Ever Changed Anything, It Would Be Illegal," written in a dark red, burgundy colour, with a stencilled black rat; it can be found on Hamra street.

"If Graffiti Ever Changed Anything, It Would Be Illegal," Hamra. Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

"If Graffiti Ever Changed Anything, It Would Be Illegal" is at one level a cynical affirmation of the futility of graffiti. As a communicative act, a graffito is essentially symbolic. It makes a leap of faith and logic that there is an audience for its message, and that competing messages would not drown it and block access to that audience. As Peters put it, "communication … is sooner a matter of faith and risk than of technique and method." It is a tongue-in-cheek statement because in many cities graffiti writing is actually considered vandalism, and is therefore illegal and sanctioned by law enforcement. In Beirut, however, graffiti artists have been arrested only a couple of times, when spraying overtly political messages in full view of the military or police. Nonetheless, this graffito evokes graffiti's subaltern status towards power holders, those who would have the authority to make graffiti illegal if they deemed it sufficiently threatening to their interests, and those who would presumably have the power to communicate and represent through their influence on mainstream media. "If Graffiti Ever Changed Anything, It Would Be Illegal" can thus be said to enact a double-speech act, with a nod towards itself, a nod towards power dynamics in society, thereby reaffirming graffiti's heterotopic potential. More interesting is the fact that this graffiti can be found far away from Beirut, in Greece for example, reflecting that graffiti is a transnational form that circulates in far-flung cities.

A black and red stencil on the "Ring" in Ashrafiyeh can be said to be visually more complex than the previous graffito because it evokes two possible interpretations. It is a polysemic utterance, one that carries more than one meaning.

"Graffiti Is/Not A Media Stunt," Ashrafiyeh (Ring). Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

In one interpretation, "Graffiti Is/Not A Media Stunt," shows two black, normatively masculine human figures, seemingly hooded, using red coloured paint to spray a human figure and another artefact on a wall. Use of colour in the caption, with "Not" in red and the remaining words in black, establishes a visual connection to the figures in the lower half of the mural. This appears to have been the standard interpretation of passers-by and other people whom I asked to explain to me the meaning of this image. But there is, I believe, another reading, one that sees the man on the left to be drawing the contours of a human body lying horizontally, probably a victim, while the second man, in the lower right-hand corner of the mural, is shooting video of the first man and the human body lying next to him. In this understanding, the red artefact in the hands of the second man is a video camera pointing at the first man. In this interpretative scenario, the image as a whole can be said to be three-dimensional because of the angle of the red-coloured, horizontal human figure. This can be said to be a criticism of television's propensity to focus on sensational topics, often involving crime and blood, as a "media stunt," while at the same time setting up graffiti as qualitatively superior, since it is "not a media stunt."

"As a deictic sign," Chmielewska writes, "graffiti's aim is reception (self-pointing through visibility, placement, articulation); as a naming sign, its goal is recognition (indexing within the locally bound hierarchies)." In effect, graffiti about graffiti call attention to the existence of this means of expression, while graffiti about other media situates graffiti as at once part of a media ecology and separate from it, an elsewhere from which critiques of the media system can be enunciated and articulated to broader issues in the public sphere. This is visible in graffiti about television, the subject of the section that follows.

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21 E. Chmielewska: Graffiti and Place (see FN 19), 153.
Graffiti and Television

Another graffito, which comments directly about frames through which the role of media and information technology in the Arab uprisings has been discussed in the mainstream media, enacts a different kind of dialogism. "The Revolution is Televised Graffitied," located at the bottom of the stairs that link John F. Kennedy Street to lower Ain El-Mreisseh, sets up a semiotic tension between television and graffiti. Playing on the 1960s social movement motto and 1970 Gil Scott-Heron poem and song titled "The Revolution Will Be Televised," the strike-through over "Televised" in this free-style graffito and its replacement by "Graffitied" elevates graffiti (over television) as the revolutionary medium par excellence. The present tense "is," in contrast to the "will be" in the original iteration, establishes "now" as the message’s temporal frame, to emphasize that graffiti, like television news, has the ability to swiftly comment on ongoing events.

"The Revolution is Televised Graffitied," Ain El-Mreisseh. Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

The mural campaign against television, associated with passive viewing, sensational content, and mindless entertainment, but also - in Lebanon - with sectarian agitation, continues with a graffito painted on a shop’s iron curtain in Gemmayzeh. "Weapon of Distraction" is a simple drawing in black of a classic (old) television set with an antenna, two knobs and a screen in the shape of a keyhole, perhaps to suggest that watching television is an addictive, and clearly distracting, voyeuristic activity that pries on other people’s privacy, akin to peeping through keyholes. An interesting feature of this graffito is the mobility of the "canvas," the iron curtain that, rolled up during the day when the shop is open, is invisible, and appears to passersby when the shop closes and lowers its curtain in the evening. As a nightlife district with restaurants, pubs and nightclubs, Gemmayzeh has an active pedestrian population in the evening; in addition, the mobility of the "canvas" means that he graffito is visible at the same time of day when people tend to watch television, setting the two in direct, synchronic competition for people’s attention.
There is a peculiar site under a bridge in Ashrafiyeh where a large graffiti/mural "hides" behind a billboard. The graffiti features a television screen with the word al-Akhbar [The News] written on it, with one girl and two boys pulling the television cable from an invisible electrical socket. On the day I took the photographs below, the billboard featured Mentos chewing gum, but the product advertised changes frequently.

To this date, I have not been able to ascertain whether the graffiti bears any relationship to the newspaper Al-Akhbar, which maybe the case because the font resembles the newspaper’s, and because the message of the graffiti resonates with the daily’s media page overall critical take on Lebanese television and its problems.
"Al-Akhbar/Television News Unplugged," Concealed by Billboard, Ashrafieh (Ring). Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

Though the spatial arrangement is unusual—one has to sneak behind the billboard, with one’s back touching the wall, in order to be able to see the graffito—this site highlights that graffiti cohabitate with other forms of visual communication in the city, including monuments and billboards, the former usually interpellating people as citizens, the latter addressing them as consumers. As Nestor García-Canclini (1998) argued:

"Graffiti, billboards, monuments [are] three manifestations of the main forces that affect a city. Monuments are almost always instruments used by political powers to enshrine the principal heroes and the pivotal events of the state. Billboards attempt to synchronize daily life with the interests of economic power, while graffiti - as well as political posters and mass demonstrators by the opposition—express popular criticism of the imposed order. That is why advertisements and superimposed graffiti that either conceal or contradict these monuments are so meaningful."23

In other words, graffiti’s dialogism rewrites the messages of monuments and billboards - and in Beirut one should add political slogans and territorial markers, in addition to pictures of candidates in election time. Even if in this particular case we have a billboard concealing a graffito, which normatively could be described as commercial promotion overshadowing social expression, in a city like Beirut, which is dotted with an abundance of billboards, outdoors advertising may be graffiti’s biggest competition for people’s attention. Graffiti, nonetheless, act as social correctors to advertising’s commercial propaganda, underscoring their heterotopic potential. In García-Canclini’s words, again:

"We must rejoice that the city is not merely a pristine continuation of tidy spaces where historical landmarks are quietly integrated into contemporary life but, rather, a living organism capable of merging its past and present struggles … they become more meaningful when resumed by the common man, when they are incorporated into the struggle for symbolic

power and, consequently, into the contradictions of daily life.”  

Other graffiti make extremely aggressive statements about television. The two examples below illustrate this tendency. The stencil "Kill the Media" is found in several Beirut neighbourhoods, usually in black or red ink, and sometimes with a twin graffito that says "Destroy the Mainstream" (the two are often sprayed side by side). Inciting to media homicide, it stridently locates graffiti outside of the prevalent media environment, with the companion graffito "Destroy the Mainstream" helping orient viewer’s interpretation that the media to be terminated are mainstream media.

"Kill the Media," Ashrafieh & Ras Beirut. Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

As for "Beirut Revolution Now: Free Your Mind, Kill Your TV," it is a free style graffito on a wall in a small, shabby parking lot on the southern edge of Hamra. Killing one’s television set is clearly stipulated as a necessary condition to emancipate one’s mind. Once liberated, the mind would realize the necessity for revolution in Beirut, this graffito seems to suggest, lamenting Beirut’s relative calm at a time when other Arab capitals are in upheaval.


The ultimate message is that television pacifies or alienates people by imprisoning their minds and

24 Nestor García-Canclini: Monuments, billboards and graffiti (see FN 23), 228.
leading them to accept the status quo, which the graffito seems to suggest is unacceptable. Latently, this graffito also conjures up an image of graffiti as more conducive to freedom and political action than television.

**Revolutionary Heterotopia? Media and the Arab Uprisings**

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As I have argued elsewhere, the Arab uprisings can be understood as battles of representation raging alongside physical struggle and military conflict. Struggles to shape narratives about the uprisings often focus on the media. In Syria as in other uprisings, the media emerged as a field where battles of representation are waged, and not only as instruments of communication. These battles, as the series of images below demonstrate, are visible as dialogical amendments, indentations, appropriations, and subversions of graffiti. The "dialogue" analysed below demonstrates that graffiti constitute a circuit of signification where multiple voices coexist rather than single, monological utterances fixed in paint on a wall.

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A stencil from the Syrian revolution, featuring a television set with the word "Kazheb" (liar) on the screen, with the caption "al-’alam al-Souri" (Syrian media) underneath. This simple stencil of a classic television set we have seen in other graffiti serves as a canvas for competing narratives of the Syrian uprising. The initial graffito accusing Syrian media of lying clearly sides with the opposition to Bashar Al-Asad’s regime.

"Al-’alam al-Souri Kazheb," Bliss, Hamra, Gemmayzeh, Qantari. Photography by Marwan M. Kraidy

Within a few days, however, a simple strike through "Syrian" and addition of "Arab" changes the meaning of the graffito completely, turning it into an accusation of Arab media as purveyors of lies, since Arab media, with a few exceptions, have rallied with the Syrian opposition and against the regime.
The following picture illustrates two changes to the stencil. Since Al-Jazeera is stricken and "All" is not, we have to assume that "Al-Jazeera" came first and "All" came last chronologically. Striking "Syrian" and adding "Al-Jazeera" is a more specific version of the previous alteration when "Arab" replaces "Syrian." It refers to the fact that Al-Jazeera has been an actively partisan player in the Syrian uprising, where it supports the opposition, reflecting the foreign policy of its patron, Qatar, which has been offering financial and logistical support to the Syrian rebels. Though Al-Jazeera's performance in the Arab uprisings is a topic for another article, it suffices to say that the Qatari network has lost staff and earned controversy with its lack of coverage of the Bahraini uprising, its partisan coverage of the Syrian revolution, and its systematic support of the Muslim Brotherhood in its various national embodiments.

The final subversion, which results in "All Media Are Liars," turns this graffito into a critique of media at large, taking the debate beyond a comparison of the virtues of various partisan media in the Syrian crisis, to raising questions about the fraught relation between media and truth in general. This, perhaps more than any other graffiti discussed here, underpins my exploratory attempt to conceptualize graffiti as heterotopia, an "other space" that even though situated within the media ecosystem, levels critique that go to the heart of the system. In addition, it highlights graffiti as an actively dialogical form that
invites engagement by various individuals who playfully subvert an original stencil to change, re-orient, and recuperate its meaning for their side of the argument. Graffiti here appears to be a highly dialogical, multi-authored cultural form.

Conclusion: Graffiti as Social Practice

This preliminary exploration was an attempt to begin theorizing graffiti as heterotopia by focusing on the ways in which graffiti-about-media function as a relatively autonomous space of critical discourse within the broader local, national, and regional system(s) of media and representation. As an everywhere-elsewhere, ubiquitous and yet outside of politically and commercially mainstream circles, graffiti is an "other space" in the city. Othering

"... is established through a relationship of difference within other sites, such that their presence either provides an unsettling … or an alternative representation of spatial and social relations."25

As such, as Hetherington reminds us, heterotopia are not distinct ontological entities; rather they are relational "spaces of alternate ordering." 26 Though the appropriation of graffiti by the mainstream - by consumer culture and the art museum - can be understood as a mutation of graffiti away from heterotopia, to join other media forms that have been colonized by market forces, it is reasonable to argue that graffiti as a genre remains more autonomous than most other media for the influence of economics and politics.

This relative autonomy from the market and the palace opens the way for understanding graffiti as a social practice enabled by the medium’s dialogical/intertextual capacities. After all

"Intertextuality is a valuable theoretical concept in that it relates the singular text principally to other systems of representation rather than to an amorphous ‘context’ anointed with the dubious status and authority of ‘the real’ or ‘reality’."27

By connecting various social, political and representational registers and enabling different people to express themselves through and about these domains - as was manifest most clearly in the stencil about Syrian media analysed in the preceding text - graffiti becomes a societal and creative process

26 Kevin Hetherington, K: The Badlands of Modernity (see FN 25), viii.
open to virtually anyone willing to participate, a "critical social practice."28 As the presence of Syrian graffiti in Beirut illustrates, this avenue of participation has a larger scale than we tend to think when we consider graffiti. Indeed, graffiti can no longer be considered a local, context-determined form of expression. It has exploited the digital sphere to evoke a "translocal spatiality".29

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The presence of graffiti on city walls has been considered as a "barometer of freedom" whereas "juxtapositions between the freedoms of the capitalist West and the totalitarian Eastern Block frequently made reference to the flowering of graffiti on the Western side of the Berlin wall."30 Indeed, the presence of graffiti as a medium of expression carries discourses critical of the contemporary social formation. As such, especially in an environment like Lebanon where commerce has conquered the few spaces uncontrolled by a sectarian political system with a firm hold over the mainstream media sphere, Beirut graffiti, in the words of journalist Pierre Abi Saab, is akin to "practicing democracy on Beirut’s walls."31

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