

and they arrived the next morning decked out in red-and-white opposition scarves, repeating details of speeches they had heard. It's my teacher's dream: collective gusto to start meaningful discussion. But this level of political engagement is particularly startling for my class. It's hard to believe this is the same collection of 12-year-olds who, when Yasser Arafat died four months ago, had been puzzled about who the Palestinian leader was and seemed uninterested in what he represented for Arab independence.

That lack of interest has been echoed by a kind of willful forgetfulness that I've noticed among older Lebanese. I've often wondered, over the 18 months I've lived here, why recollections of the lengthy civil war, which began in 1975 and ended 16 years later, are often so vague, as if many here live under a

Frances Brown is an American teacher at an international school in Beirut. Her articles have appeared in the International Herald Tribune and the Christian Science Monitor.

accepts thousands of Palestinian refugees, most of whom settle in the south.

1958 U.S. Marines intervene to quell a Syrian-aided revolt against the Lebanese government.

1967 As the Arab-Israeli war ends, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) begins to use Lebanon as a base for actions against Israel.

1975-90 The Lebanese civil war. Leftist Muslims and Palestinian units fight Maronites, Phalangists and other Christian forces. An estimated 100,000 people are

SOURCES: U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT, CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, BBC NEWS, THE WORLD ALMANAC, RANDOM HOUSE ENCYCLOPEDIA

sort of group amnesia. Parents, understandably, have little desire to relive the conflict, even — especially — when some of the parallels to today's politics are striking. Older Lebanese are still trying to repress the memory of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's destabilizing arrival in their country 35 years ago. "Good riddance," one mother said to me after Arafat's death. "We have



BY KEVIN FRAYER — ASSOCIATED PRESS

2005: Syrians leaving their Beirut intelligence headquarters in response to demands by the Lebanese opposition, the United States and the United Nations to reduce forces.

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nothing to do with that man."

But suddenly, their children do. This week, a student raised her hand and asked if we could study the civil war. Her classmates cheered. Meanwhile, their high school-aged siblings were caravanning downtown to be part of the demonstrations. I couldn't help seeing these teenagers' sudden political involvement as another stunning departure

from the recent past. After two years of doing alumni interviews with ambitious Lebanese high-schoolers interested in attending Yale, I've been simultaneously electrified by these students' detailed geopolitical knowledge, and deflated by their vehement disgust for politics both as a process and as a profession.

Their only experience with government is

ne's Syrian — says all the people at that rally were forced," one relates. "Yes, and my driver told me that at the end of the month, they get paid," adds another. Who can be sure? But it's revealing commentary for a country deeply polarized between the families who can choose to send their children to a Western-oriented private school, like the one where I teach, and the people who have no choice but to work for them.

I can claim a foreigner's perspective — inexperience in the layers of the past under which the Lebanese continue to labor. When I ask questions, most people gladly tell me their story. But even in the midst of this exhilarating political reawakening, the country's two sides seem rarely to be telling each other. To me, and to CNN watchers everywhere, the energy of Martyrs' Square is infectious. But if these rousing demonstrations truly signal the start of a "new Lebanon," then that energy needs to find a common expression much closer to home.

Author's e-mail:

frances.brown@aya.yale.edu

Here's News You Can Use, Any Way You Choose

MEDIA, From B1

to blame for these misperceptions. If the only "news" you get is from talk radio and conservative blogs, you could be forgiven for continuing to believe that Saddam Hussein was tight with al Qaeda and that Iraq really did have the banned weapons. This is not to pick on Bush followers. Many on the left harbor their own fantasies that they consider fact — about how Bush knew of 9/11 in advance, or how he was coached during one of the presidential debates via a transmitter between his shoulder blades.

Two decades ago, the late senator-scholar Daniel Patrick Moynihan remarked that "everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." Now, ideologues are claiming their own facts as well.

According to the nonpartisan Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the proportion of people regularly reading newspapers has fallen to 42 percent from 58 percent in a decade, while viewership of network evening news has fallen to 34 percent from 60 percent. And with that decline comes a loss of the mainstream media's role as referee, helping to sort out fact from fiction in the nation's affairs.

"Today, a host of new forms of communication offer a way for newsmakers to reach the public," the Project for Excellence in Journalism observed in its annual report last week. "Journalism is a shrinking part of a growing world of media. And since journalists are trained to be skeptics and aspire at least, in the famous phrase, to speak truth to power, journalism is the one source those who want to manipulate the public are most prone to denounce."

In place of the traditional press, outlets once seen as alternative have become a new mainstream media. Conservatives tune in to Rush Limbaugh (20 million weekly listeners) or Sean Hannity (12 million), and

log on to the Drudge Report (claiming near 10 million visits a day). Liberals opt for the late-night commentary of Jon Stewart, Web sites such as Salon and Daily Kos, and Michael Moore's films. Those on either side can scan the Google news headlines and click on those that fit their worldview.

These partisans claim to see a connection between the declining audiences of traditional outlets and the pervasive accusations of bias. An ad for "Weapons of Mass Distortion: The Coming Meltdown of the Liberal Media," a 2004 book by L. Brent Bozell III, says "the liberal media's audience will continue to defect to the emerging alternative news outlets — outlets more in tune with their perspective on the world."

Organizations such as Bozell's Media Research Center, David Brock's Media Matters, and scores of partisan outlets on both sides that back them up, are devoted almost entirely to attacking the press. Those on the right are so practiced at citing liberal media bias that they've assigned it an abbreviation: LMB. Left-wingers, meanwhile, complain about a timid, corporate media that helped Bush get reelected and led the nation to war in Iraq. The attacks help to explain why 45 percent of Americans now say they can believe little or nothing of what they read in the papers, compared to just 16 percent two decades ago.

But declines in news viewership and readership have more to do with changing habits and technology than with accusations of bias. "That's dictated by lifestyle," says Andrew Kohut, the Pew Research Center's director. "It's not a product of declining credibility of the media. Having observed it for a long time, I just don't see any correlation." Indeed, in a recent Pew poll, those most likely to complain about newspaper bias (and presumably the ones who would turn away from the mainstream press) were the most faithful readers.

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This is not to say claims of bias are groundless. Reporters aren't machines, and some prejudice inevitably finds its way into print or on the airwaves. But our dominant bias is skepticism of whoever is in power. Don't just take it from me, though. Former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer, in a candid admission in his new book, writes: "Many Republicans, especially conservatives, believe the press are liberals who oppose Republicans and Republican ideas. I think there's an element of truth to that, but it is complicated, secondary, and often nuanced. More important, the press's first and most pressing bias is in favor of conflict and fighting... No one can claim with a straight face that the White House press corps were easy on former President Bill Clinton."

Regardless of the merits, the pervasive accusations of bias are making it increasingly difficult for the traditional media to play their role of gathering and reporting facts. The danger in this situation became evident in the exit polls from November's elections. These polls are one of the most valuable tools for understanding the American electorate, but they were

made unreliable because some conservatives were so distrustful of the media that they declined to answer questions from media-sponsored pollsters; this, in the view of some experts, may explain why early exit polls forecast a victory for John Kerry.

The Bush administration has exploited the fragmentation. The president avoids the media "filter" — as his aides like to call it — by holding few news conferences and granting more interviews to conservative talk show hosts, local news stations and specialty publications less likely to ask tough questions. Officials also routinely disparage mainstream media efforts to hold them to account. In a presidential debate last year, after Kerry cited a news report, Bush retorted: "In all due respect, I'm not so sure it's credible to quote leading news organizations."

This is no coincidence. Look at Page 77 of the Defense Science Board's 2004 study titled "Transition to and from Hostilities." The Pentagon advisory board writes: "Today, political struggles are about the creation and destruction of credibility." The board was writing about foreign propaganda, but the lesson applies at home, too. In the past, the key to winning in politics was to control the information. Now, when information has no controls, the key is making your information credible and casting doubt on other information — such as that found in the mainstream press.

Ultimately, it's not good for anybody, even partisans, to get into a postmodern morass where there are no such things as facts, only competing perceptions of reality. Would liberals really favor the absence of a press that calls into questions the Bush administration's claims about Iraq's weapons and ties to al Qaeda? Would conservatives really favor the absence of a press that brought the Clinton scandals to light?

The Republican National Committee

cited The Washington Post to refute Kerry's claim that his vote to authorize force in Iraq was not really a vote for war. More recently, the RNC cited The Post to show that Democratic leaders were at odds with Democratic voters on Social Security. The Democratic National Committee, in turn, cited Post reporting to highlight Bush budget cuts that the administration played down. Partisans love to complain about bias when the facts are against them, but pleased to cite the mainstream media when the facts are in their favor.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism asserts that, at a time of media fragmentation, the traditional press's truth telling is more important than ever. "In this new world, we continue to believe journalism is not becoming irrelevant," the new report argues. "The need to know what is true is all the greater, but discerning and communicating it is more difficult." But we're up against some short-sighted partisans who would prefer to do away with this truth-telling role.

Stephen Hayes of the conservative Weekly Standard protested in a November article that during the campaign, "journalists at the New York Times and the Washington Post and the television networks saw themselves not as conveyors of facts but as truth-squadders, toiling away on the gray margins of the political debate." These journalists, he continued, "fancy themselves thinkers, not mere scribes. They go to work every day to tell us not what the Bush administration has said, but what it has left unsaid."

Imagine that! An independent press looking for the truth rather than serving as stenographers for the powerful. It's a quaint tradition Americans would be wise not to abandon.

Author's e-mail:

milbankd@washpost.com