MEDIA AND INFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN LEBANON

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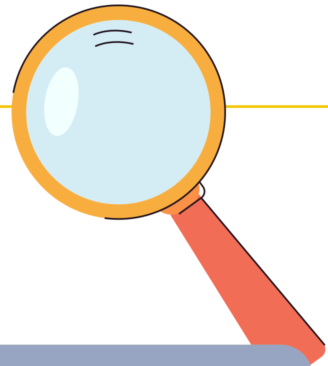

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Glossary

Mainstream media / Traditional media sources: the traditional forms of mass media such as television, radio, magazines, and newspapers, as opposed to online means of mass communication that influence many people, and both reflect and shape public opinion.

Community-based media: Community-based media include individuals and organizations who produce or are involved in media (radio, TV, print, internet, etc) aimed at serving the needs of particular communities or subcommunities, be they geographical, ideological, cultural, etc.

Civil Society Actors: individuals who are active within their communities, currently work officially or unofficially within the media and civil society sector.

Alternative Media Outlets: These are media sources that differ from established or dominant types of media (such as mainstream media or traditional media) in terms of their content, production, or distribution[1]. Alternative media are small and/or nascent media platforms, mostly online, who offer an alternative narrative to mainstream media.

1. Downing, John (2001). Radical Media. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Introduction

Reliable and unbiased information is a powerful accountability tool. Lack of information, at any stage of a conflict or crisis, makes people vulnerable, easy to manipulate and susceptible to negative stereotypes, fear or hate. Peoples' ability to make informed decisions strengthens societies and fosters democratic structures and optimism about the future. This is of a particular importance ahead of the 2022 elections, as it is crucial that alternative media content is created and existing alternative media is supported and its capacity is strengthened to produce accurate and reliable information as well as data and evidence-based journalism to support accountability and provide space for independent actors, including women and youth.

The Media and Information Landscape Assessment in Lebanon (MILA) research study was designed to examine the media habits and preferences of specific audiences in Lebanon and capture the role of new and emerging media outlets in the country. The study was commissioned by Internews in March 2021 and conducted in collaboration with the URIKA Agency and the Maharat Foundation to collect primary data from audiences and media outlets in the country. The analysis was carried out by Dwan Kaoukji, an independent consultant, who reviewed and analyzed data sets and made key recommendations based on the findings.

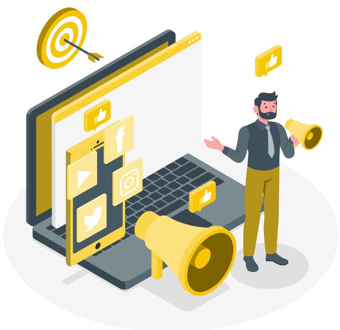
The findings of this formative study will be used by Internews and Maharat Foundation to inform the design and implementation of their "Amplifying Diverse Voices in Lebanon" project activities, funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and focused on youth and women in underserved communities. Findings will also be used to inform Internews media development strategy in country and learnings shared across its MENA portfolio.

1. Executive Summary

During this period of uncertainty and transition in Lebanon, independent and truthful media is more important than ever to enable the Lebanese people to hold those in power accountable. However, it is remarked that the mainstream Lebanese media is highly politicized and centralized, and this has deepened the gap between Lebanese citizens- especially Lebanese women and youth- and traditional media outlets. In fact, during the recent protests, one of the slogans was “Stop watching TV”, as more and more citizens grew dissatisfied with the dominant and self-serving narratives pushed by all the major television stations in Lebanon. Young people are increasingly turning to alternative media sources for news, debate, analysis, and public service information that have started to emerge over the past year and during the recent protests.

The aim of this media and information landscape assessment is to understand the information flow, dynamics, gaps, needs and to evaluate trust levels towards different information sources. While there is an abundance of media development-oriented research studies conducted in Lebanon, this research is unique in its focus on vulnerable groups in marginalized areas who often face information gaps and media vacuums. Areas of focus include Lebanese women and youth in Akkar, North, Beirut- Mount Lebanon, Beqaa, Nabatiyeh and Baalbek el Hermel.

The assessment zooms in on three main respondent group:



1. Information producers (alternative media outlets)

2. Information consumers (audiences in the abovementioned marginalized areas)

3. Civil society actors (key opinion leaders and change agents within the communities)

Summary of Key Research Findings:

Organizational Structure

While some of the interviewed alternative media outlets have written public mission and vision statements, the majority had undocumented and restricted statements. Particularly, local alternative media outlets with micro and/or personal funding and limited human resources, perceive the task of developing an organizational vision as a challenging. Moreover, there often seems to be a gap between alternative media outlets' objectives and the organizational structure or capacity needed to achieve its vision.

Most interviewed media outlets operate with part-time staff and rely on the work of unpaid staff members and volunteers. Paid roles within each media outlet are determined by the grants they receive which are often transient. The outlets' organizational strategies and work plans were often incongruent with existing skills and human resources, which contributes to employee attrition, and eventually decreases the outlet's potential for growth. The lack of human resources limits the media outlet's capacity to fundraise for core-funding or unrestricted funding, and much more resources are needed to support permanent staff roles and to strengthen the outlet's ability to achieve its mission and be sustainable.

Legal and regulatory framework

With public authorities stalling on the implementation of the Access to Information Law and not fully abiding by its obligations, journalists, NGOs, CSOs, and any other natural or legal person' right to access information about public bodies governance, operations, and management in the country, is hindered. This affects governance reporting, accurate sharing of information with the audience about public affairs, the editorial processes of media outlets, and consequently impacts the information ecosystem in the country. Furthermore, the ambiguity of laws governing the media sector has complicated media outlets' registration and their ability to obtain a legal identity which affects their opportunities to access funds. Two successful mitigation strategies identified are seeking the support of a legally registered organization to incubate the news platform or register as a for profit civil company.

Media Financing

While the lack of diversified funding sources is a common problem for most alternative media outlets within the region and other regions as well, Lebanese media outlets are also dealing with the extra complication of a failing and unstable banking system. The pressures imposed by current economic hardships and the collapse of the banking sector in Lebanon have made it almost impossible for media outlets to depend on banks to manage their accounts and seek financial assistance. The majority of their funds are raised through grants from the non-profit sector, charities, and only few are able to depend on private sector funding. Advertising revenues and public donations are scarce, and the subscription-based model is widely rejected by most of the interviewed media, particularly by those in their early years and only just beginning to create a loyal audience base for reasons related to audience reach and the right to free and public sources.

Editorial Policy

Alternative media outlets are predominantly present online, particularly on the various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube). Their online reach continues to increase, but audience engagement varies across governorates. For instance, audiences outside of Beirut continue to rely on offline traditional media sources (TV) for news and political information.

Most of the media outlets have been developing their policies over time and are adapting it to address the context they are in. Policies focus on responding to socio-political changes, introducing counter-traditional media-narratives and tackling misinformation. Others are more localized and were specifically set up to address a local agenda or a gender-focused one to counter and/or complement existing male dominated narratives. A commonality among the majority of outlets is their efforts to address fake news and verify information published by traditional media. While this validation process is important to ensure audiences have access to accurate and sufficient information about a certain topic, it is however time-consuming and puts alternative media outlets at a disadvantage with audiences who are specifically interested in learning about breaking news.

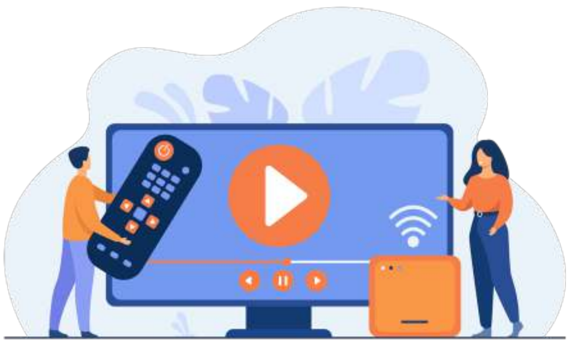
Censorship Spill-Over

Amidst fear of a shrinking freedom of expression space which media outlets face within Lebanon, media outlets that choose to widen their audience reach within the region are exposed to country specific restrictions and government censorship of their social media content. For example, the Sharika wa Laken faced restrictions in Egypt when trying to publish critical news coverage of the political situation in the country. As a result, media outlets are forced to find different ways of publishing the same content but packaged in a different way to be able to maintain their audience base in these countries.

Media Consumption

Of all the media platforms available in Lebanon, television still is the preferred and most consumed information source according to survey respondents. The three most popular TV channels are MTV (39%), NTV (29%) and LBC (27.5%), all privately owned.

Much of the news consumption occurs via the TV device itself and not on mobile news applications that accompany TV channels. This is particularly prevalent among the over 40 years age group, while the younger age groups are more likely to consume social media and are more critical of traditional media outlets. The most popular online platforms to consume, share, interact and express their own opinions about news are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with a rise of popularity for the video-sharing platform TikTok.



Video formats appear to be the most popular format for news across all ages and locations, followed by push notifications and written articles.

Media Literacy

The majority of respondents are convinced that they can identify fake news or false information, and most of them are familiar with the concept of fact checking. Follow-up questions revealed though that fact-checking mostly means checking with friends and family rather than doing actual research about the accuracy of information. Also, 30 % stated they would still share a piece of information even if doubting its veracity.

A biased headline, a politically biased information source, a missing information source and an exaggerated headline are reported to be the most common reasons to doubt a piece of information irrespective of its producer being traditional or alternative media.

Information Needs

In general, the majority of survey respondents reported an interest in receiving more social and economic news. Only 13.1% of the respondents believe they are under-represented in media, and that media coverage should be more inclusive and decentralized. When particularly asked about women and youth representation in the media, 24.7%, stated they are not satisfied with the degree of representation of women and youth in traditional media. Respondents want to be exposed to topics associated with women protection in the news (domestic violence, sexual harassment, freedom of expression and civil laws) as well as topics associated with economic opportunities for youth (job opportunities information, market orientation, education, and successful youth initiatives).

Furthermore, respondents shared their information needs in relation to the upcoming parliamentary elections (2022): detailed information about candidates, detailed information about candidates' electoral programs, information on the electoral process itself, information on events organized by candidates and their political parties as well as information on civil society and elections observers.

Traditional vs. Alternative Media Credibility

Generally, respondents irrespective of gender, consider traditional media outlets (TV channels, radios, and newspapers) to be untrustworthy, biased, or very biased sources of information, because of their political affiliation, lack of transparency and bias towards politicians. Friends and family, followed by television and local influencers are considered the most trusted source of information for local news, while the least trusted sources are political leaders.

The awareness of the existence of alternative media outlets is still relatively low: Only 25 % of respondents had heard of one or more of the outlets.

Women and youth civil society actors mentioned that they rely on social media platforms for news but at the same time are sceptical about any information shared by an unknown party, or which lacks a reference. Consequently, they are more inclined to trust information shared over Facebook than shared over WhatsApp. Facebook allows them to filter and validate the information based on other people's interactions. Interactivity is also an important criterion for them when evaluating the credibility of an alternative media outlet, as to whether they allow audiences comment on their website and exchange opinions.

Stronger, yet not so strong, links to civil society actors

It is usually the assumption that alternative media outlets are mostly followed and supported by a loyal audience base of civil society actors and youth activists. Moreover, many of the media outlets have named youth as an important target audience. However, the trust women and youth civil society actors have in alternative media outlets seems to be very fragile despite its recognized role as alternative source of information. Inhibiters of trust are related to

- perceived radicalism in media outlets' vision of change,
- persistent focus on discrediting traditional media outlets,
- dominant elitist and academic approaches and
- doubts over their inclusivity and representation.

Women and youth civil society actors also criticized that a big portion of alternative media outlets' content is "recycled" from news published by traditional media outlets and is thus not original. They believe that in order to remain or become more relevant, these outlets need to improve their reach, representation, coverage and get closer to people.

Key Recommendations:

A number of recommendations have been identified from the research and directed at key stakeholders to support the performance of media outlets and to help improve their capacity to deliver quality news and improve their reach at scale.

Recommendations for donor agencies

- Consider more long-term, core and flexible funding to support alternative media outlets to strengthen their organizations, respond to changes, make deeper impact, and worry less about their survival.
- Support media outlets with innovation funds so they have a space to innovate and grow closer to their audiences.
- Contribute to knowledge exchange and learning through supporting media outlets' capacity building & development.

Recommendation for alternative media outlets

- Diversity funding models.
- Improve organizational strategy & mission.
- Seek legal support to improve their legal status and increase fundings opportunities.
- Strengthen relationships with existing audience.
- Improve marketing strategies and understanding of audiences' engagement online.
- Improve content strategies to include new topics and digital formats that resonate better with their audience's interests, concerns, and preferences.
- Improve their audience targeting and understanding of their pains, across demography and geography.
- Expand geographical reach.

Recommendation for media development organizations:

- Support media outlets develop their organiwzational, financial, thematic, audience reach and engagement capacities.
- Encourage and facilitate cooperation, peer to peer learning, networking, and collaboration among media outlets.

2. The media landscape in Lebanon:
the operating context

Lebanon has historically been considered one of the few Arab countries in the Middle East with a free media environment, and one that guarantees the protection of human rights and the freedom of speech in its constitution. However, the space for freedom of expression in Lebanon has decreased significantly over the past years, as the government has cracked down heavily on activists and journalists following the 2019 protests[1].

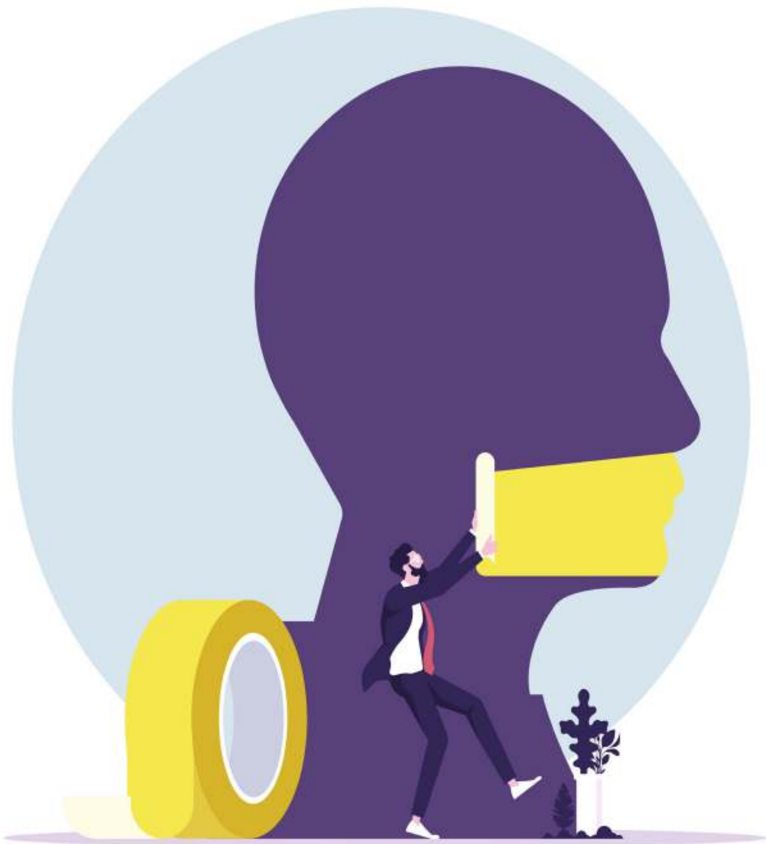
Since 2019, Lebanon has experienced the steepest social and political decline of its history. It is grappling with the most significant economic crisis in its modern history that has led to an outstanding inflation rate of approximately 500%, soaring unemployment, and corruption charges against Lebanese authorities that have left the country in a political deadlock with no end in sight. Furthermore, the country continues to reel from a deadly blast that took place at the city's port on August the 4th, 2020 and resulted in 218 reported deaths and over 7,500 injured, and US $15 billion in property damage.

Amidst all the social and political changes in the country, the space for freedom of expression continues to decline as the laws preventing the 'defamation against public officials' continue to be applied and threaten the role media can play during this crisis. Existing mainstream media sources in the country are highly centralized, and predominantly located in Beirut. Furthermore, they are entirely owned and funded by political groups that represent specific sectarian views and do not hold the government to account, or by businessmen from the private sector and financial sector who have historically promoted their own narratives and political positions in the country.

1 The 2020-2019 national protests in Lebanon were triggered by citizens reaction to increased unemployment and government's plan to increase taxes on gasoline, tabaco and communication services. It eventually quickly expanded into a nation-wide wave of protests and led to the condemnation of the shielding of the government and ruling class from accountability, and their failure to provide basic services to people.

In response to the growing political uncertainty in the counstry and the controlled media landscape, a number of alternative media outlets emerged both online and offline with the mission to counter the existing narratives and introduce new unbiased and reliable sources of information. Many of these outlets have attempted to question traditional media sources by addressing the shortcomings of the traditional media and holding political parties to account. The alternative media outlets have gained increasing popularity with young audiences in Lebanon who have grown tired of traditional media platforms and narratives and are increasingly turning to alternative media outlets for more trustworthy and accurate information that represents the reality and the views of the public.

Yet, despite the growing interest from specific demographic groups in the country (youth), alternative media outlets in Lebanon continue to face considerable challenges in their efforts to reach audiences at scale and produce pertinent information at a regular pace. Many of these outlets have been set up rapidly by activists and volunteers with little or no journalism experience, but with ambitions to make a change and to document the socio-economic changes in the country. The unstable context and challenging political environment pose additional obstacles.



3. Research Methodology and Sample

3.1 Research objectives

The overall objective of the research is to examine the media consumption habits of audiences in Lebanon, particularly among women and youth, and assess audience engagement and perception of alternative media outlets. More specifically:

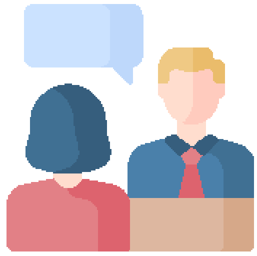
1. To understand the target audience in target communities around information and media consumption, their needs, concerns, topics of interest and information gaps.
2. To explore how women and youth in identified areas receive and consume information and their relationship with traditional and local media outlets.
3. To identify the preferred media sources and their level of credibility among target audience for this study, and their consumption habits.
4. To examine the operational capacity of alternative media outlets to deliver content and reach their target audiences and identify the challenges they believe they face in this process.

3.2 Research Methods & Sample

The following four research methods were used to collect data for the study:

1. Literature review – The objective of the adaptive literature review was to map existing media outlets in the country and determine how they are perceived by audiences, particularly women and youth. This allowed the research team to identify critical information gaps that guided the design of the research. Over 80 academic articles and studies published by local and international research centers and media institutes between 2018 and 2021. These information gaps were related to understanding the following aspects of local media outlets:

- Media viability of the outlets (media strategies, business models),
- Existing local media outlets across Lebanon (their coverage, audience, challenges, content),
- Other sources of information (i.e., role of family and friends in information receiving and sharing),
- Legal framework's impact on alternative media outlets, and
- Role of women and youth in media.



2. Qualitative In-depth interviews with alternative media outlets – 14 In depth interviews were carried out with founders of media outlets and their staff to capture operational processes and to assess their overall capacity development needs. The interviews examined funding models, organizational security, editorial content, audience reach and engagement strategies. Interviews were carried out online, as the Lebanese governmental COVID-19 measures prevented researchers from directly conducting in-person meetings.

3. Quantitative Audience Surveys – 1568 surveys were carried out in eight municipalities across Lebanon's governorates, with the exception of Beirut[1], including Kobayat (Akkar), Jabal Mohsen (North), Deir el Ahmar (Baalbek el Hermel), Zahle (Beqaa), Iqlim el Kharroub and Lasa (Mount Lebanon) and Hasbaya and Marjeyoun (South). Locations were chosen according to the following criteria:

- Underrepresentation of community voices in the media (based on literature review and contextual reality)
- Misrepresentation of community groups in media (existing bias of sectarian[2] nature)
- Low level of media penetration (measured by the prevailing income level[3] and the existence or absence of local media outlets based on literature review).

1. According to Literature Review, most audience research conducted based their samples in Beirut, as such, and given the abundance of audience data residing in Beirut, the team decided to leave the capital out of the field survey population.
2. Each Governorate is dominated by a certain sect. The other sects are thus considered minorities and when outlets and media cover those areas, they tend to leave out the voices, opinions, and needs of those religious groups and villages in those areas.
3. The conducted literature review concerning financial viability, suggested that people sitting in low-income brackets have less access to good quality internet, digital devices, and telecommunication mediums. Moreover, and because media outlets are interested in maximizing their profits, targeting areas with poor income levels is not deemed profitable enough, and therefore, these areas are less targeted. The survey was also meant to examine this assumption.

4. Virtual focus-group discussions with women and youth civil society actors – Ten focus group discussions were carried out with women and youth residing in Beirut, Mount Lebanon area, the Beqaa area, the Northern area, and the Southern area. Two focus groups per area, except for Beirut and Mount Lebanon had four focus groups. The aim of the FGD was to understand how informed audiences in Lebanon think about alternative media outlets and the role they play in the country. Locations were selected based on the degree of homogeneity between existing governorates in terms of:

- Existing social fabric (based on literature and socio-political contexts).
- Existing stereotypes and preset stigmas (based on literature and socio-political contexts).

A framework analysis was used to examine the data from each method individually (alternative media outlets, surveyed population and women and youth informed audience/FGD participants) and emerging themes were identified and summarized. Key findings were validated by triangulating between the datasets. This served to combine methodical scrutiny of the data alongside the contextual knowledge to allow for more meaningful and nuanced findings.

The following table summarizes the research methods and sample size for each stakeholder group in the study.

	Research method	Sample size
Media outlets	Key in-depth interviews	online through sur- 3 +) 11 (veys
Online audience	Audience survey	participants 1,568
Women and youth	Focus Group Discussions	10

Research Methods

4. Research Findings

The following section presents research findings from the analysis and is separated into three parts:

Part 1 (section 4.1) - examines the operational capacity of media outlets in order to determine their organizational needs and how they engage with their target audiences.

Part 2 (section 4.2) - examines the perspectives of the survey respondents, in particular their media consumption habits, information needs and media interests

Part 3 (section 4.3) - examines whether alternative media outlets are reaching survey respondents and have the capacity to meet their needs.

4.1 Media Capacity & Needs Assessment

The research drew from interviews with staff and managers of the media outlets and examined five areas of the media outlets' operating models to deliver media efficiently. These are:

The analysis examined the performance of each of the outlets individually and explored their perspectives against each of the above mentioned five areas.

01. Organizational structure –infrastructure of the media outlet, staff make up, the vision and mission of the media outlet.

02. Funding model –business model of the media outlet, fundraising and financial management.

03. Legal and political frameworks –the media outlets' legal registration and knowledge of their legal rights to operate in the country.

04. Editorial processes & digital security –ways in which content is created, to determine whether the processes is participatory with audiences, and assessing the outlets' digital security needs.

05. Audiences' reach and engagement –the media outlets' capacity to reach and engage audiences online and aggregate viewers across platforms and locations.

Organizational Structure

Media outlets selected within the sample were all created with similar objectives: to respond to socio-political changes in the country and tackle misinformation in the media by introducing a new narrative that counters the existing ones produced by traditional media. Within this larger goal, community-based media outlets were specifically set up to address a local agenda, while the gender-focused media outlets (Khateera and Sharika wa Laken) were set up to counter or complement the male-dominated media narrative.

> Our primary objective is to counter what people see in the media about women's rights and representation. Our vision is to change people's perspectives on what it means to be an Arab woman today.
>
> -Khateera

The strategic visions of the media outlets were well articulated by those that run the organizations, but not always documented. Media outlets were asked to provide their vision and mission statements and organizational strategies, however only around half indicated that their strategies exist in written format and are publicly available, while others explained they are still in the process of developing them or have not considered documenting their organizational strategy, mission, and vision. The need to develop an organizational vision is perceived as a challenging task by two outlets who find it difficult to capture the changing nature of the organization and context they operate in and do therefore not consider it a priority (Ana Hon and Bchoufk).

Most media outlets operate with part-time staff and rely on the work of unpaid staff members and volunteers. Only five out of the fourteen media outlets have full-time staff working alongside volunteers (Raseef 22, Sharika wa Laken, Maharat News, Megaphone and Hadi Productions). Paid roles within each media outlet are determined by the grants they receive and may not always be long-term.

Capacity needs around organizational structure

- Lack of coherent organizational strategies with mission and vision statements – While some of the media outlets were able to state their mission and vision statements, there often seems to be a gap between their objectives and the organizational structure or capacity needed to achieve this vision. Organizational vision and mission statements need to be aligned with the actual capacity of the media outlet to deliver their objectives effectively, taking into consideration the operational environment they are confronted with.

- Lack of human resources – The need for more permanent staff was regularly referred to as a key need for media outlets to operate effectively and ensure their sustainability. Many of the media outlets currently depend on the work of a small number of staff, and volunteers, which makes it difficult to manage the daily workload and to ensure continuity of the media operation. The lack of human resources limits the media outlet's capacity to fundraise for core-funding or unrestricted funding, and much more resources are needed to support permanent staff roles and to strengthen the outlet's ability to achieve its mission and be sustainable.

- Weak strategies for staff development – none of the interviewed media outlets have clear job descriptions for organizational roles or plans to assess and develop their staff's capacity. Consequently, the outlets' organizational strategies and work plans were often incongruent with existing skills and human resources. The weakness of these human resource policies and infrastructure contributes to employee attrition, and eventually decreases the outlet's potential for growth.

Funding models in a context of economic hardship

Media outlets were asked to describe their funding models and methods of generating revenue in the present current economic climate in Lebanon. The banking sector has prevented citizens and organizations from accessing their money in banks at their own choice and made it particularly difficult to manage bank accounts. These pressures make it almost impossible for media outlets to depend on banks to manage their accounts and seek financial assistance. Each of the media outlets interviewed explained the majority of their funds were raised through grants from the non-profit sector, and charities, and few had depended only on funding from the private sector. Much of the funding models function as non-governmental organizations because the staff responsible for raising the funds has come from the development sector and is familiar with the process of raising money. Furthermore, they are familiar with the funding streams available from international aid and have the skills and experience to secure them and maintain a positive relationship with multiple grant donors. The majority of those who do receive funding from international donors, chose to actively publish the names of the funders online to maintain transparency and provide audiences with information about their affiliations. However, none of interviewed media outlets publicly publish the total funds received to date on their websites, and do not publicly provide type of the incurred expenses.

> The current economic situation in Lebanon makes it particularly difficult for us to fundraise and depend on sources of funding from audiences. We have explored options through advertising and avoid all funds associated with any political parties.
>
> \- Megaphon

Most of the media outlets are aware that grants are not sustainable and will eventually be difficult to maintain. They also expressed a concern around the competitive nature of applying for funding for media development and are dependent on only a small number of funders, which could eventually run out. Alternative funding sources are limited for these media outlets and do not provide a diverse range of funds. For instance, only two media outlets (Ana Hon and Hadi Production) have managed to secure funding through advertising channels and two others (Rehla and Beirut Banyan) have managed to acquire support through public donations made online through PayPal and Patreon and were able to receive donations directly from their audiences.

Subscription-based models are not considered as a desirable option by the media outlets, particularly by those in their early years and only just beginning to create a loyal audience base. This model is considered to go against their principle of free and open access for all people. Interviewees believe that paid content affects their audience reach and as such their ability to contribute to awareness raising, as it limits people's access to accurate information, especially those with less favorable economic conditions. Furthermore, there is the challenge of competing with politically funded platforms that provide free information to the public. Several reasons make it unlikely to achieve major income through a subscription model approach: the dire economic situation in Lebanon, the banking sector's collapse, the poor access to online payments and the lack of a culture of paying for access to media content are some examples. For it to work, the subscription model needs to target a particular niche of audience, those who are financially at ease.

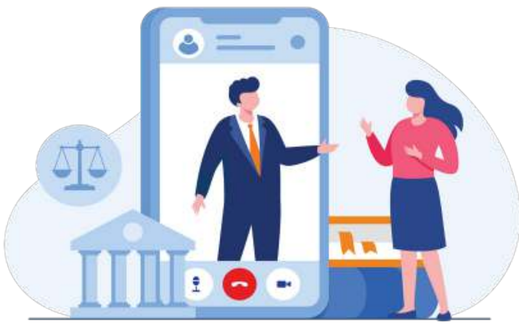
All media outlets were strongly against acquiring funding from any political party or private foundation as they see it as a risk to their editorial independence and believe it would jeopardize their relationship with their audiences. Media outlets expressed having more freedom when relying on funds from charitable grants, when compared to other funding sources, this is particularly important as funding sources are a main determinant of the trust and loyalty of the media outlets' audiences.

Capacity needs around funding models

- Low awareness of alternative funding models for media – The existing funding models of almost all the media outlets are not able to cover the main costs and do not allow them to make a profit. The media outlets are mostly familiar with one form of fundraising for their work, and while some have explored alternative sources, they are limited. The advertising-based funding model for example is not a common source of income because the audiences following the media outlets are too small within such a competitive market, and also the number of advertisers is decreasing because of current economic hardships. The subscription model is one that was almost unanimously rejected by most media agencies because they feel it would affect their relationship with audiences and influence their content. And very few have access to payment systems that allow them to receive diverse funding. At the same time, the availability of funding options in the current context is limited, making it even more difficult to access and compete for.

- Lack of fundraising skills to obtain and manage different sources of funding – It was evident from the interviews that most of the media outlets lack the skills and experience of developing funding models for media organizations that go beyond grants. While many of the media outlets have successfully raised non-governmental funding grants, they are unfamiliar with other forms of funding available to media outlets, such as grants from private businesses. Furthermore, funding from grants comes with uncertainty and conditions that make it unsustainable, and as a result requires media outlets to explore alternative funds.

Legal and political frameworks



In 2017, the Lebanese government adopted the Access to Information (ATI) law, and in August 2020, it issued its implementation decree. The ATI requires all public bodies to publish data including budgets, decisions, financial reports and completed tenders as well as ministerial decrees, circulars, and enforcement regulations[4] –using online tools and platforms, appointing Information Officers in public administrations, and exercising the right of user's privacy. The ATI could have been a tool to reinstate trust between the state and citizens and fight corruption. However, and since 2017, the full implementation of the law has been stalled. The reasons are mainly political in nature, and according to Democracy Reporting International, the highest state authorities, including the offices of the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of the parliament, did not comply with ATI[5].

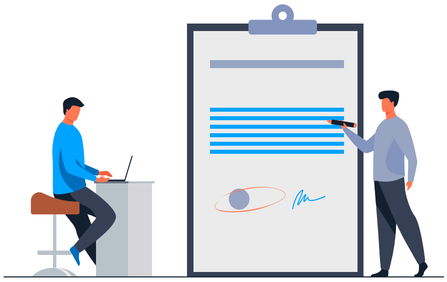
4. Human Rights Watch. (2019, September). Lebanon: Access to Information Law Stalled. Retrieved from Human Rights Watch: Lebanon: Access to Information Law Stalled | Human Rights Watch (hrw.org)

5. Sabine el Hayek and Andre Sleiman- Democracy Reporting International. (2020, August). How access to information can help

With public authorities stalling on the implementation of the ATI and not fully abiding by its obligations, journalists, NGOs, CSOs, and any other natural or legal person' right to access information about public bodies governance, operations, and management in the country, is hindered. On an information production and supply level, this is reflected in the content media outlets produce: governance's reporting, and accurate sharing of information with the audience about public affairs is mired. As such, the lack of political will has hindered the full implementation of the ATI, which had specially affected the editorial processes of media outlets, and which in turn had affected the information ecosystem in general: citizens lack a proper access to accurate information about their public institutions.

Legal registration

The current context in Lebanon does not make it easy for media outlets in Lebanon to register because much of them are based online -a space that is not recognized by the law. In fact, "there is no legal framework in Lebanon for media companies that have adopted digital communication technologies over the Internet to reach their followers, or for websites and online platforms that designate themselves as online media companies." (Media Startups study in Lebanon conducted by Maharat and DWA[6], p.38.)



Most media outlets, within the sample, are not legally registered except for 4 outlets: Raseef 22, Megaphone, Maharat Foundation and Sharika wa Laken. Within the current legal vacancy and ambiguity in laws governing the media sector in Lebanon, two legal models are mainly adopted by alternative media outlets to gain a legal identity, and thus be able to open a bank account and receive funds from donors:

1. The Incubation Model, whereby a legally registered Non-Governmental Organization incubates a news platform. The news platform would thus be considered as a project within the programmatic portfolio of the NGO. Practically, this means that the news platform receives funds through the incubator NGO's bank account and its staff are legally and administratively liable to the incubator. The incubator NGO would then be responsible of socially registering the news' platform staff and issue their salary. This is the case of Sharika wa Laken incubated by Fe-Male7 and Maharat-News incubated by Maharat Foundation.

2. For-Profit Civil Company Model, whereby the media outlet is registered as a civil company and pays taxes. This is the case of Megaphone and Raseef 22

tackle corruption in Lebanon. Retrieved from Democracy Reporting International:https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/how-access-to-information-can-help-tackle-corruption-in-lebanon/

6. Media Start-ups study in Lebanon, Maharat and DWA, 2019, http://maharatfoundation.org/en/mediastartup2019

7. Fe-Male is a civil feminist collective working with women and girls to eliminate injustice through building young feminist movement, empowering agents of change, and campaigning together against discriminatory norms and policies. Fe-Male was registered as a National Non-Governmental Organisation in 2013 (registered under the number 2013/867 AD). For more information about Fe-Male: https://www.fe-male.org/

who opted for this solution to facilitate access to funds and gain a legal identity as operating media outlets in the country. It is worth noting that according to interviewees, the process of civil company registration is easier, shorter and requires less approvals than the process of non-governmental organizations' registration. The process takes on average 2 months, allows the entity to open a bank account as legal persons, can provide social security to its staff, which increases their opportunities of receiving funds. Registering as a Non-Governmental Organization requires a minimum of 6 months and the approval of several stakeholders (Lebanese General Security, the ministry of interior, and the relevant ministries depending on the cause the NGO is created for).

Those which are not legally registered are primarily operating on social media platforms and as a result do not see a need to register their presence as a company or organisation. Some interviewees mentioned that because they work for an online media outlet that is not legally registered, they are not recognized as professional journalists. Most unregistered media outlets spoke of the freedom of not being tied to a single context, and not having to abide by strict legal regulations to deliver their content. Not having a legal registration in Lebanon; however, prevents them from accessing funding opportunities. Only three of the media outlets pay taxes in Lebanon, while six do not qualify for paying taxes because they are not registered. Five media outlets do not pay taxes because they have not made any profits.

The absence of a legal registration decreases opportunities to receive funds, but do not eliminate it. Some Interviewees mentioned that since the collapse of the Banking Sector in Lebanon (starting 2019), some donors were being more flexible allowing funding for non-registered media outlets. The award would then be wired through international money transfer (Western-Union for example) or directly in-cash if the donor is present in Lebanon and the grant is below 10,000 USD.

Legal capacity needs

- Lack of resources to address civil laws and legal frameworks – many of the media outlets are unaware of existing legal models that they can adopt to gain a legal identity, especially if operating as digital media outlets. As a result, there have been few efforts to legally register outlets. Moreover, media outlets and the civil society at large lack the ability and know how to advocate for media law reform, especially when it comes to digital media laws and regulations. In addition to that, employees are not legally registered for social security because the media outlets themselves do not have a legal presence in the country, and thus do not have a legal identity. Consequently, staff needs, and rights are not protected. The provision of legal support would help alternative media outlets better understand which legal model they can adopt and how to best operate within the vacant and ambiguous media-legal framework in Lebanon.

Editorial processes

The editorial process for developing content among eleven out of the fourteen media outlets were designed with a similar purpose; to address the partiality in the media and tackle fake news or misinformation. As a result, their editorial policies are aimed at verifying existing news sources published by traditional media sites and address multiple topics. Megaphone for example publishes daily reports on Instagram that counter what is published in the traditional press in Lebanon by providing alternative evidence to a story. Similarly, Khateera counters specific gender taboos in Arab society by providing historical facts on the cultural practices that have contributed to the gender norms.

Most of the media outlets stated they have developed their policies over time and are being adapted to address the context they are in. Some media outlets actively address topics by regularly monitoring news published by traditional media sources and select topics they feel are in the public's interest. Khabar b Story, and Lebanon News 365 explicitly stated they have engaged with audience reactions published online to gage opinion to specific topics, which helped to inform which articles they chose to publish on their sites.

Almost half of the media outlets have a written editorial strategy or policy that is updated either monthly or annually (a total of seven) with clear publishing criteria to help guide the type of content and the style in which it is produced. All the media outlets described that their policies were developed through a participatory process with the entire team and were built on their ideas and ambitions. However, five of the media outlets do not have an editorial policy at all, while two have media policies, but have not documented them (namely the Ana Hon platform and El Khabar b Story). Despite the fact that many of the outlets

have editorial policies, the majority do not have an editorial board to manage them (a total of nine platforms), this is primarily due to the small number of employees set up by individuals. Despite this, however, some platforms are in the process of forming an editorial board with a permanent team to manage the process (such as Megaphone).

Almost all the media outlets interviewed demonstrated that they have the skills to avoid forced censorship or being banned by other websites or political parties and find ways to avoid being shut down. Megaphone in particular has experienced a number of attempts to censor them, and instead developed ways of avoiding an attack on their site. However, when it comes to ensuring the media outlets have digital security measures in place such as data protection, firewalls and/or reverse proxies, few media outlets were aware of the processes for protecting their content or data online, and all of them were very eager to learn the techniques and safe online surfing behavior to improve their digital safety and security.

We work with digital safety specialists to protect our website from hacking. We have participated in few basic digital safety and security training but are looking forward to developing our skills on this level.

– The Public Source.

Our website was banned in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. We moved from [.com] to [.net] and as such we became available again in Egypt. On our website, we share with visitors some steps on how they can bypass firewall restrictions through, for example, using VPN or googling the title of the article and access it from Google instead of our website.

- Raseef 22.

Some of our content was banned on our social media platforms, especially articles mentioning Hezbollah and its secretary general. However, our content was less banned after we registered with Facebook as a news platform. Because of this, and because we have faced several attempts to hack our accounts on social media platforms, we are very conscious of the importance of digital safety and security and some of our staff have received basic training on this regard.

– Megaphone.

The cost of accessing broader audiences on Facebook and Instagram are a barrier for us. And their policies are restrictive.

– Lebanon News 365.

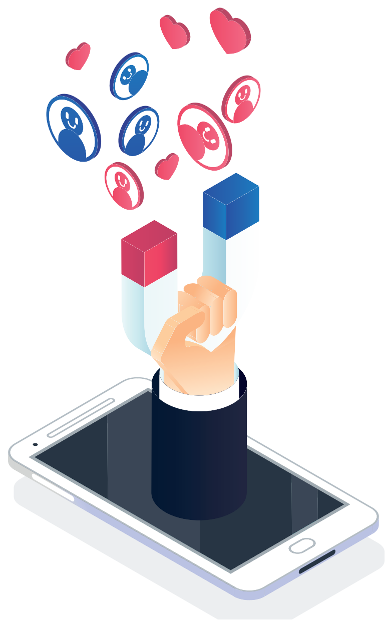
Almost 75% of the media outlets interviewed, specifically stated they have policies to address fake news and verify information published by traditional media. They do this by researching the topic and highlighting counter arguments from trusted experts and specialists on the topic. As a result, the research processes for these news agencies are critical but take time and as a result may affect the ability of media outlets to broadcast breaking news. This puts them at a disadvantage with audiences who are specifically interested in learning about an event or incident as soon as it has occurred. Despite this, however, many of the media outlets attempt to rapidly respond to news published by traditional media and are up to date with current affairs.

Editorial capacity needs

- Lack of clear editorial boards & policies – Despite many of the outlets having editorial policies in place, there is clearly a capacity need for more structured and transparent editorial boards in place that manage the content.
- Lack of digital security measures – Media outlets need to be aware of digital security measures for their sites and be able to protect their data and digital infrastructure.

Media outlets' audience reach and engagement

The geographic reach of these outlets includes local, national, and regional coverage. Two media outlets out of the fourteen target specific regions in the country (namely Ana Hon which covers Tripoli, and Bchoufk which covers the Chouf districts), whereas a total of seven target national audiences, and five cover the Middle East and North Africa and Arabic speaking diaspora more broadly. However, those media outlets are likely to face country-based restrictions and potentially face government censorship of their social media content. For example, the Sharika wa Laken faced restrictions in Egypt when trying to publish critical news coverage of the political situation in the country. As a result, many were forced to find different ways of publishing the same content but packaged in a different way to be able to maintain their audience base in these countries.



With regards to analyzing audience analytics, almost all the media outlets do not examine user data to determine their effect on audiences. A total of eleven media outlets confirmed they do not collect user data via surveys, analytical tools or through interviews with audiences, due to a lack of skills and capacity to carry out this kind of research. However, they do examine the nature of the conversations shared through social media online.

Audience engagement and reach capacity needs

- Lack of a strategy to understand audience reach – alternative media outlets are reaching a broad audience across multiple social media platforms; however, their strategy for reaching audiences at scale is not clearly defined. For instance, it is not clear what their socio-economic, geographical, and political target group is, what thematic approaches they are adopting, and how they intend to reach broader audiences through their activities.
- Lack of in-depth user data –There is an untapped potential in the area of audience analytics, mainly because media outlets lack the relevant skills. Alternative media outlets could explore existing and free tools such as google analytics and social media audience data to better understand the consumption habits of audiences online and their preferences for content.

The following table summarizes the number of followers the media outlets have on their existing social media platforms (the acronym NA (Not Available) is used when a media outlet does not have accounts on a certain social media platforms).

Outlet Media	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Megaphone	K 75	K 22.8	K 88.8	3.17k
Public Source	1.4k	k 4.2	1102	NA
Khabar b Story	NA	NA	17.1k	NA
Lebanon news 365	NA	NA	11.5k	NA
Production Hadi	M 1.4	NA	35.2k	NA
The Beirut Banyan	2.8k	4.7k	6.2k	k 2
W Laken Sharika	69.8k	2.8k	9.4k	780
Khateera	167k	1.8k	136k	92.7k
Rehla	2.2k	k 1.8	2.4k	NA
Maharat news	64k	2.5k	249	242
Politics Naked	1k	256	11.1k	NA
Raseef 22	690k	130k	151k	Hidden number of subscribers
Ana hon	k 126	NA	4.5k	1.7k
Bchoufk	21.6k	86	890	438

Interviewed Alternative Media Outlets' Online Reach

The following table summarises the key capacity needs of alternative media outlets as outlined in the findings above.

Organizational Structure

- Lack of coherent organizational strategies
- Lack of human resources
- Weak strategies for staff development

Funding Model

- Low awareness of alternative funding models
- Lack of fundraising skills

Legal and Political Framework

- Lack of access to legal support to address civil laws and legal frameworks

Audiences' Reach and Engagement

- Lack of strategy to understand audience reach
- Lack of in-depth user data

Editorial Processes and Digital Security

- Lack of editorial boards and policies
- Lack of digital security measures

Alternative Media Outlets' Key Capacity Needs

4.2 Audience Media Consumption & Information Needs

The following section is split in two parts: the first part presents data from a field survey that was carried out with survey participants from different areas across the country, and a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The second part presents data from a series of virtual focus group discussions carried out with women and youth civil society actors.

Audience Survey

The survey sample consisted of 1,568 respondents (50% male, 50% female), targeting people below the age of 40. It was conducted in eight villages: Kobayat (Akkar), Jabal Mohsen (North), Deir el Ahmar (Baalbek el Hermel), Zahle (Beqaa), Iqlim el Kharroub and Lasa (Mount Lebanon) and Hasbaya and Marjeyoun (South).

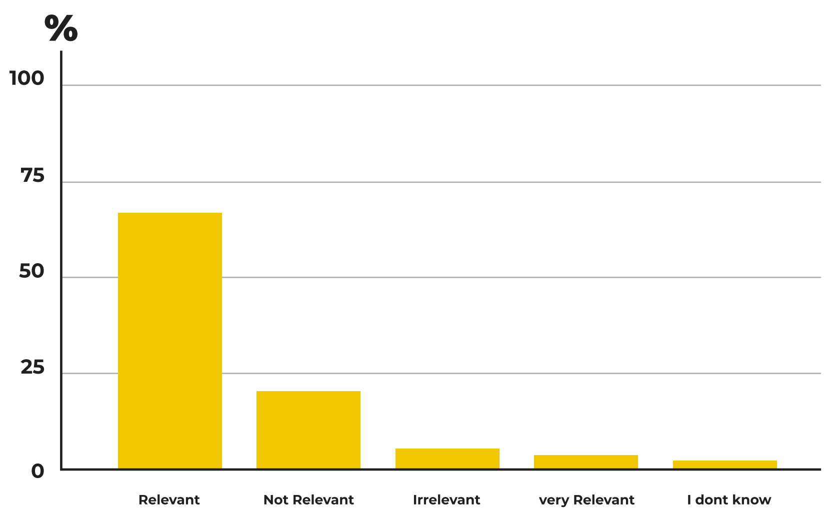
The analysis examined four key areas of audience interest:

- Media Consumption Habits: patterns of traditional and alternative media consumption, barriers to access, and media content format preferences.
- Trust in the Media – attitudes towards traditional and alternative media outlets.
- Media Literacy & Misinformation identification- ability to identify fake news or false information and recommendations to combat fake news.
- Information needs- themes of interest concerning general news content, as well as youth, women, and upcoming parliamentary elections- related content.

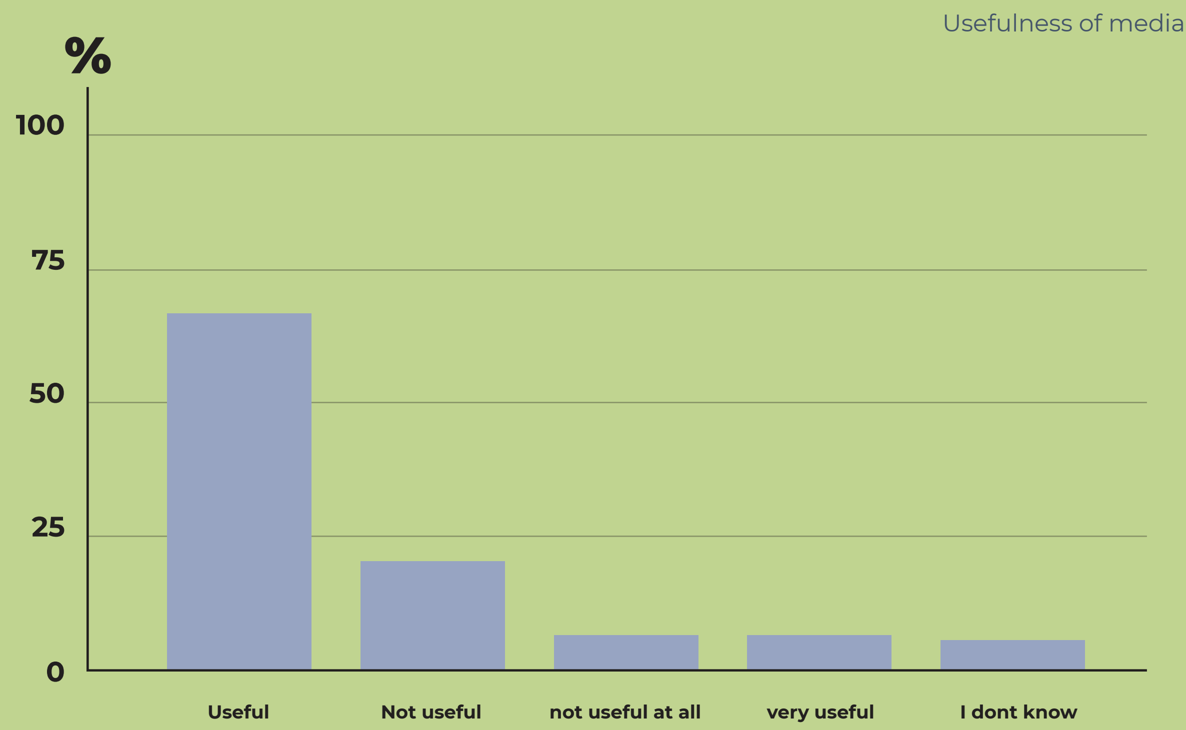
Media consumption habits

Traditional Media

When asked about their perception of traditional media coverage in Lebanon, survey respondents thought it was relevant, appropriate for their context, useful and informative. These traditional media outlets included popular television, newspapers, and radio channels in-country.

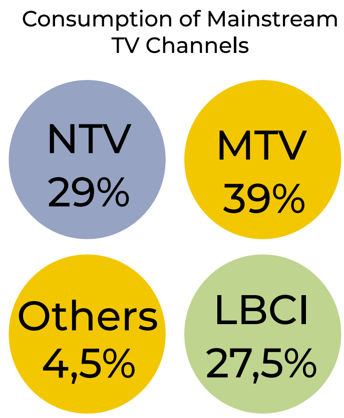


Relevance of media



TV

It is no surprise that Television is the most preferred and consumed information source in Lebanon, according to survey respondents. This is particularly prevalent among the over 40 years age group, while the younger age groups are more likely to consume social media.



Approximately 58% of the survey respondents stated that they consume television for at least an hour every day to watch the news and 20% reported a minimum of 2 hours daily consumption.

The three most popular TV channels are MTV (39%), NTV (29%) and LBC (27.5%), all privately owned. Much of the news consumption occurs via the TV device itself and not on mobile news applications that accompany TV channels; 80% of the total survey sample stated they do not use TV channel apps.

Radios and Newspapers

Radios and Newspapers recorded lowest consumption rates (12.4% and 3.5% respectively). The three most popular stations among surveyed radio consumers were Radio Liban Libre (اذاعة لبنان الحرّ 31.6%), Radio Liban (26.3%) and Voix du Liban ((صوت لبنان 17.7%)). The three most popular outlets among surveyed newspapers' consumers were Annahar (70.7%), AlAkhbar (17.3%) and L'Orient le Jour (3%).

Digital Content

The information communication technology sector in Lebanon is managed by the government. Its infrastructure is weak and mobile services are expensive. For example, Lebanon ranked 105 among 150 countries in terms of the average price of 1GB of data (1GB costs 3.82 USD). The dire economic conditions and the volatile socio-political climate in

Lebanon is particularly challenging at present, making it difficult for people to access information on their devices. Electricity cuts are becoming the norm, internet is becoming increasingly unstable, and the currency exchange rate is spiking, making online navigation, news, and information access more challenging.

Despite the abovementioned, access to online information sources was reported to be high among survey respondents, and across all the locations selected. 95.7% reported owning a mobile device (of whom 79% own a smart phone). And of those with a smart phone, 92.6% have internet access on their device. The three most mentioned barriers for easily accessing media were:

1. The cost of the internet on their mobile devices (where almost a 25% of the sample said they faced this challenge).

2. Electricity cuts (hindering their ability to access both offline and online information sources).

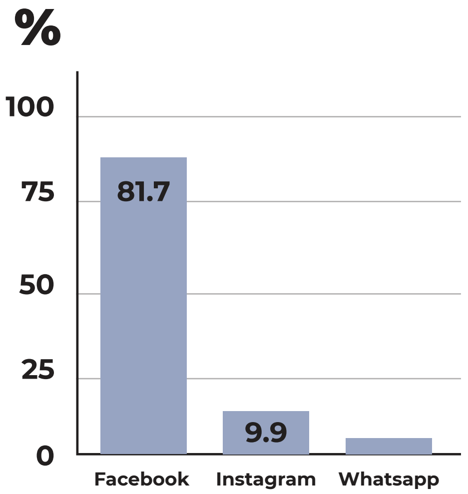
3. The high cost of modern electronic devices (Tablets, Laptops, Smartphones, etc.) and mobile devices upgrade (limited financial access to devices with higher internal storage space).

4. Internet cuts and weak coverage (Wi-Fi and 3G/4G).

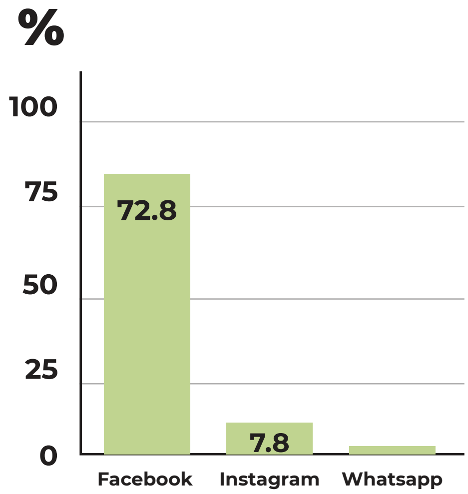
Social Media

Social media platforms are particularly popular among younger audiences, especially those under 30s who appreciate that they can engage with news and share their views on the sites as well. Approximately 40% of respondents reported to spend between 30 minutes and one hour a day on social media consuming the news and 30% reported a minimum of 2 hours of daily social media consumption.

The most popular online platforms for consuming news are Facebook (81.7%), Instagram (44.8%), and Twitter (16.9%). The same ranking applies concerning respondent's platform preference to share, interact and express their own opinions about the news. Facebook remained respondents' favorable platform (72.8%), followed by Instagram (35.7%) and Twitter (10.1%). Interestingly, TikTok - the video-sharing focused social media platform, was considered fourth both in term of news consumption (5.2%) and interaction platform (3.3%), and as such, outpaced WhatsApp in popularity on both levels (3.9% and 2.5%).



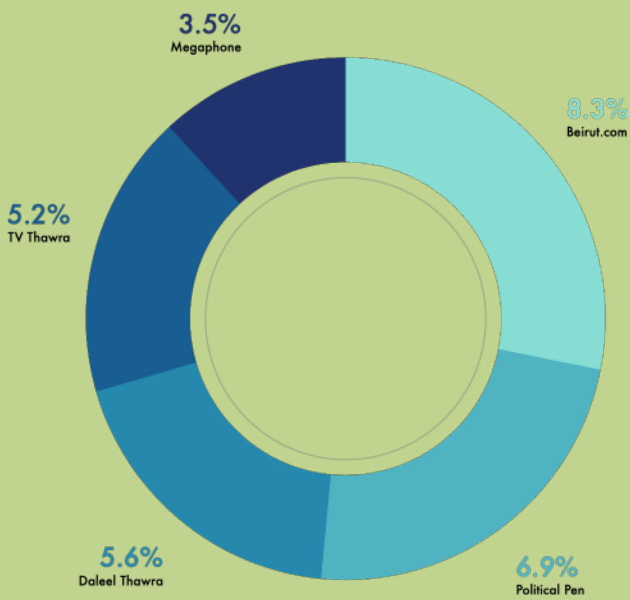
TOP 3 SOURCES FOR CONSUMING NEWS



TOP 3 SOURCES FOR EXPRESSING OPINIONS ABOUT NEWS

Alternative Media

Approximately 25% of all the surveyed respondents are aware of the listed alternative media outlets within the research sample. Beirut Today was the most recognized (10%) outlet, followed by Beirut.com (8.3%), Political Pen (6.9%), Daleel Thawra (5.6%), TV Thawra (5.2%) and Megaphone (3.5%). Akkar and Baalbek el Hermel recorded the highest level of awareness of alternative media platforms (69% and 63% respectively). The level of awareness is particularly high among the 18–30-year-old (38%) while only 17% of 31-40 years old are aware of alternative media platforms.



When asked how they came to learn about alternative media outlets, the first source mentioned was online advertisements (42.6%) followed by friends & family (22.6%) and other people (20.3%). Interestingly, while Mount Lebanon recorded the lowest level of awareness (7%), the majority of those who are familiar with alternative media outlets there were exposed to them through online advertising (77.1%). The same pattern is observed in the North and Nabatieh which also recorded low awareness level but high advertising reach (66.7% and 60% respectively). This suggests that people in Mount Lebanon, North and Nabatieh are more susceptible to online ads on social media platforms than people in other governorates. Online advertising appears to work best with respondents aged between 41 and 50 years old (52.1%), followed by those aged between 31 and 40 years old (50.1%) and younger respondents aged between 18 and 30 years old (39.6%). Furthermore, alternative media outlets' advertising efforts seem to reach more men than women (45.8% and 39.8%).

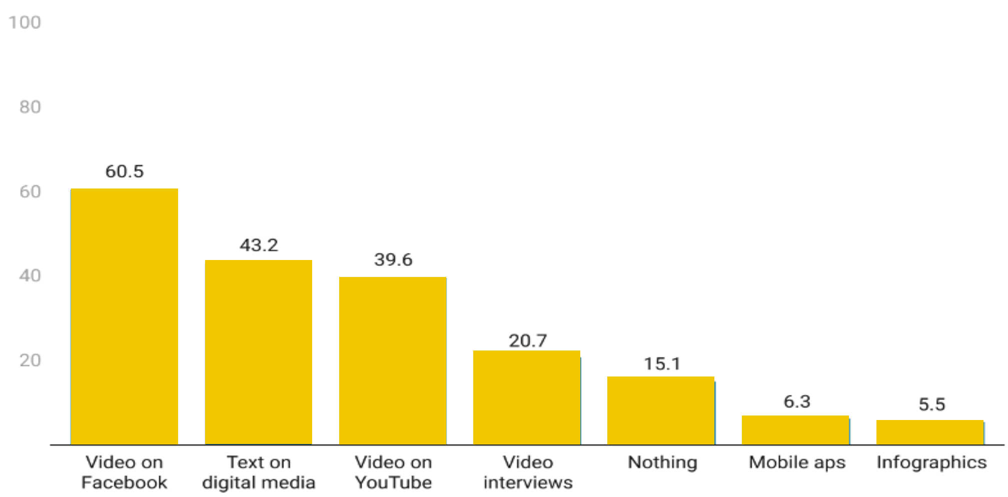
The ways in which respondents became aware of alternative media sites varied across geographic locations. In Akkar for example, 'friends and family' and 'word of mouth' were the main mediums through which respondents learned about alternative media outlets, whereas online advertising came third (37.6%, 29.4% and 26.6% respectively). In the Beqaa, 'word of mouth' and 'friends and family' were also the most common (43.5% and 26.1% respectively). This pattern is also observed among survey respondents aged between 18 and 30 years old. In Baalbek el Hermel on the other side, flyers seemed to be a good offline advertising tool. It came third (16.7%), after online advertising (42.5%) and Friends and Family (20.2%) and appears to work best with respondents aged between above 50 years old (20%).

Most Preferred Media Content Format

Survey respondents name short videos as their preferred digital format for receiving free news, followed by written format. Survey respondents aged between 18 and 40 years (alternative media outlets' main target audience), are more interested in videos shared on Facebook than those shared on YouTube (65% vs 44.4%). They have also expressed interest in written content (44%) but were not very enthusiastic about long Interviews (20%) and Phone Applications (6.2%). Interestingly, a similar pattern was observed with older respondents (aged above 40 years old): 44% of them preferred videos, 40% preferred written format, and only 16% preferred other types of formats for receiving news.

When asked if they are willing to pay for a more accurate and customized content, only 93% of survey respondents were not interested. The current dire economic situation could explain this lack of interest in subscribing for paid content. Moreover, this finding further validates interviewed alternative media outlets' assumption that the subscription model would push audiences away. On the other hand, the 7 % of respondents who were willing to pay for tailored content were mostly interested in receiving a series of videos covering specific topics of their choice (31.2%), through push notifications[8] (28.7%) and summative videos covering recent news (16.5%).

Preferred Digital Formats for Receiving Free News



8. A push notification is a message that pops up on the mobile device conveying breaking news.

Media Literacy & Misinformation Identification

70.8 % of the survey respondents believe they are able to identify fake news or false information, while 42.6% say they are familiar with the concept of fact checking.

The most common triggers that make respondents doubt a broadcasted content

20,7%	19.9%	17.6%	17%
A blased headline	A politically blased information source	A missing information source	An exaggerated headline

When asked if they would share a news article or information despite doubting the validity of its content, approximately 30% of survey respondents said they would still share it. Respondents are more likely to check and validate news sources with friends and family (32.3%), and 18.6% stated they are more likely to fact-check the news online and 17.2% would wait until the truth comes out. This further confirms that the communication with friends and family is a critical part of audience exposure to news, as they are a common source of information, and a popular medium to disseminate information, and a trusted information filter. However, it is worth noting that resorting to friends and family to validate news and information might enforce confirmation bias: information consumers might process information by looking for or interpreting it or validating in a way that affirms one's existing beliefs. This might keep people in their own bubbles, leading to more affirmation of specific beliefs and attitudes, disregarding whether the information is accurate or false. Hence the risks associated with such a validation approach and the need to increase media literacy among people, especially those residing in media-underserved areas.

When respondents were asked to recommend ways of combating fake news on social media and for alternative media outlets, the most popular methods[1] were:

1. It is worth noting that respondents' choices were made after the above list was read out to them, multiple choices were possible, and an 'Other' option was also available to respondents.

1. Improving journalists and media outlets' ability to fact-check news before broadcasting it (25.2% of survey respondents).

2. Improving people's media literacy and their ability to identify fake news (23.6%).

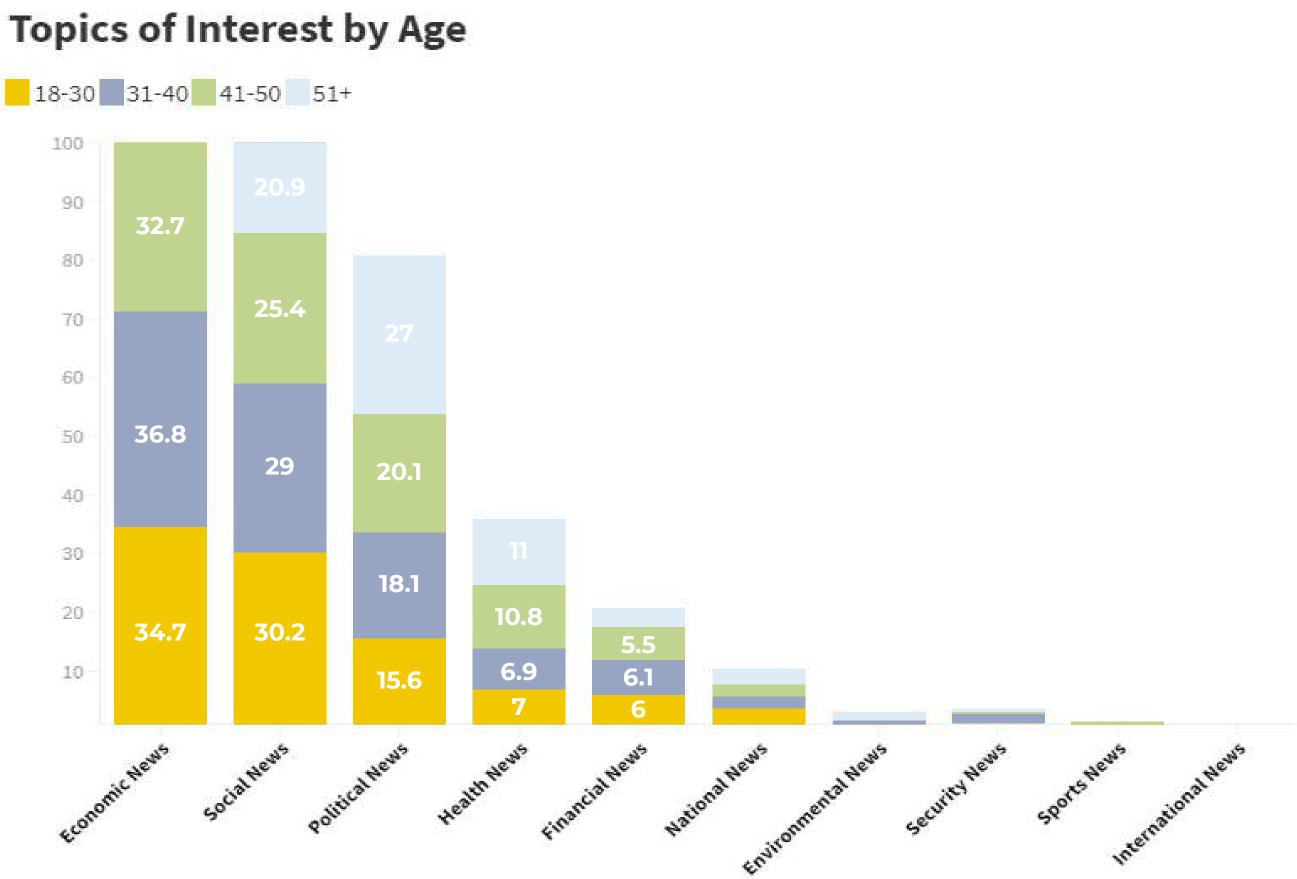
3. Introducing strict laws that criminalizes sharing fake and/or misleading news (20.6%).

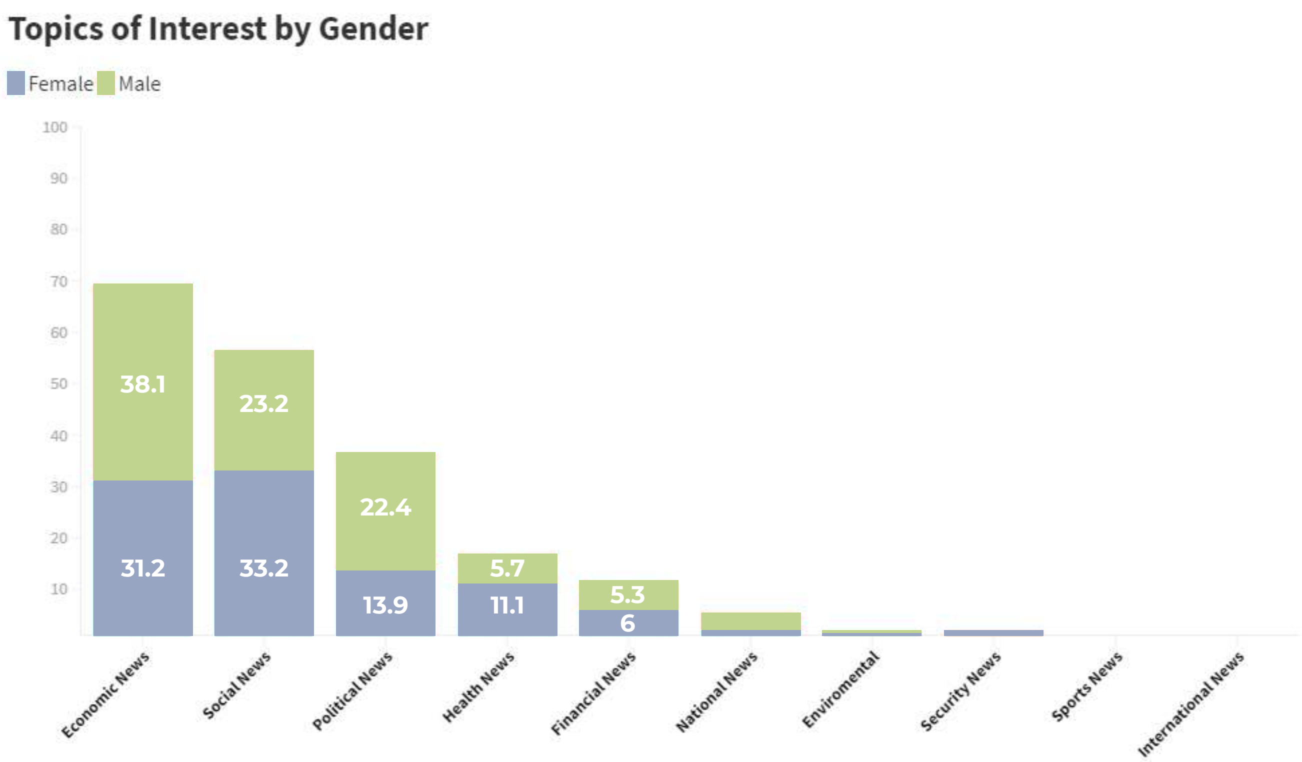
Strengthening the role of the ministry of information in monitoring media content's accuracy (18.5%).

The first recommendation suggests that survey respondents doubt media outlet's capacities to fact-check their news, which could be a reason for the lack of trust in media outlets (both traditional and alternative). The recommendations suggest that survey respondents believe fake news can be combated through joint efforts of multiple stakeholders: the state (government and laws), the media outlets, and the people.

Information needs

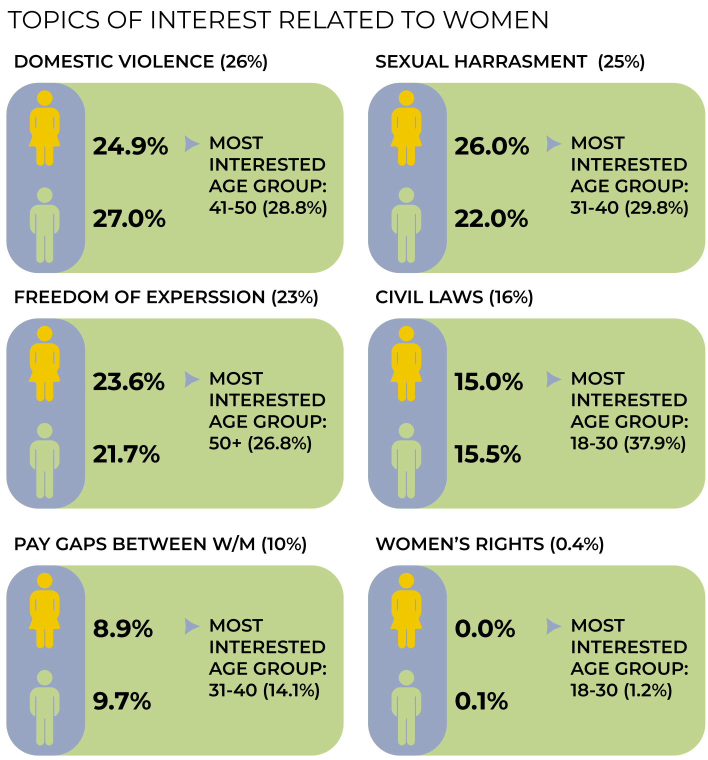
Half of survey respondents expressed an interest in topics that relate to public affairs and news. They were specifically interested in content covering economic and social issues in the country. The following figure summarizes the most relevant content for respondents by age and gender:





Respondents were also asked about their information needs on three levels: women, youth, and parliamentary elections-related news. For instance, they want to read more about topics associated with women protection and consider topics such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, freedom of expression and civil laws to be under-reported on. These information needs do not affect the level of satisfaction with women representation in traditional media. In fact, 71.7% feel satisfied with how women are portrayed, with no difference observed between genders or across age. However, Beqaa and Akkar governorates recorded lower levels of satisfaction (75% and 63.8% respectively).

Moreover, respondents expressed interest in content associated with economic opportunities for youth, such as job opportunities information, market orientation, education, and successful youth initiatives. Despite this information gap, 76.7% of respondents are satisfied with how youth were portrayed in traditional media, with no difference observed between genders or across age. However, almost half of respondents from Beqaa expressed a lack of satisfaction. This lack of satisfaction with women and youth representation in traditional media could also partially explain the relatively high levels of lack of trust in media shown from these two governorates.



While survey respondents are mostly in consensus around how women and youth are represented in the traditional media today, conflicting views on the topic are present among the women and youth civil society actors. Some of the respondents believe the presence of women in the news is on the rise, and has improved over the last few years, however many are referring to an increase in the number of anchor women rather than the topics associated with women. Whereas others believe that women are not represented enough, and their voices are not raised in the media, particularly referring to the lack of female experts called on to speak on TV shows.

TOPICS OF INTEREST RELATED TO YOUTH

JOB OPPORTUNITIES (40%)

40.9% ▸ MOST INTERESTED AGE GROUP: 31-40 (42.9%)

39.5

MARKET ORIENTATION (22%)

22.0% ▸ MOST INTERESTED AGE GROUP: 18-30 (22.1%)

20.8%

EDUCATION (18%)

17.6% ▸ MOST INTERESTED AGE GROUP: 41-50 (19.5%)

17.5%

SUCCESSFUL YOUTH INITIATICES (15%)

13.4% ▸ MOST INTERESTED AGE GROUP: 31-40 (37.9%)

15.7%

> Youth representation is very limited in traditional media, especially when it comes to politics and economics. Alternative media outlets provide more space for youth to express their opinion especially that they access and consume social media more than other age ranges.
>
> – Participant in South and Nabatieh Youth FGD.

> Some alternative media outlets do not address people of all political backgrounds, but only speaks to those who have similar ideologies.
>
> – Participant in the Beirut and Mount Lebanon Youth FGD.

> Traditional media limits the role of women in politics and media. Men are more present in media than women and have higher opportunities in this field. Entry barriers for women are remarkably greater. For example, women are criticized and mocked when talking politics because it is considered as a men's game. Alternative media outlets are less critical and more gender sensitive.
>
> – Participant in Beirut and Mount Lebanon Women FGD.

Finally, in relation to the upcoming parliamentary elections (2022), information needs are summarized as follow:

- Detailed information about candidates (27%)- a need particularly observed among women in general and in Beqaa and Mount Lebanon
- Detailed information about candidates' electoral programs (21%)- a need equally observed among gender but particularly noted in Beqaa and the North
- Information on the electoral process itself- the adopted law, its impact, vote counting process, etc. (12.5%)- a need particularly observed among men in general and in the North, Akkar and Baalbek
- Information on events organized by candidates and their political parties (12.1%)- a need equally observed among gender but particularly noted in the North, Nabatiyeh and Akkar
- Information on civil society and elections observers (7%)- a need equally observed among gender but particularly noted in the North and Akkar

The need for more detailed information about candidates and their electoral programs and for information on civil society and elections observers is widespread among youth aged between 18 and 30 years old and between 31 and 40 years old. Survey respondents aged above 40 years old are less interested in election' observers' bodies and keener on details about the election process and the events organized by candidates.

TOPICS OF INTEREST RELATED TO PARLIAMENTARY

DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT CANDIDATES (27%)

DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT CANDIDATES' ELECTORAL PROGRAMS (21%)

INFORMATION ON EVENTS ORGANIZED BY CANDIDATES AND THEIR POLITICAL PARTIES (12.1%)

INFORMATION ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS ITSELF(21%)

INFORMATION ON CIVIL SOCOETY AND ELECTORAL OBSERVERS(21%)

When asked what changes are needed in the media sector more broadly, the most popular suggestions[1] are:

1. Introducing strict laws on media outlets' impartiality and transparency (44.6%). This suggests that almost half of the survey respondents consider the current existing legal framework as not being comprehensive enough to firmly address issues of media outlets' impartiality and transparency. It also reiterates a previous finding concerning the reported lack of trust in existing media outlets.
2. Introducing laws to protect media outlets and journalists from political and sectarian lobbying (26.5%)- this indicates that almost a third of the survey respondents believes that political and sectarian pressures are exercised on information producers, which affect the quality of produced information, and thus their ability to access accurate, objective, and relevant information.

1. It is worth noting that respondents' choices were made after the above list was read out to them, multiple choices were possible, and an 'Other' option was also available to respondents.

3. Improving media outlets' coverage making it more geographically inclusive (13.9%), this could partially explain why 40% of respondents stated that they do not trust traditional media outlets. This could be an opportunity for alternative media outlets to fill in this gap and provide wider coverage, beyond the center.

4. Launching new media channels in various areas across the country (13.1%)- similar to the above point, this suggests that respondents are requesting more options to resort to for news and information and consider the geographical base of media outlets as an important factor in news dissemination.

These suggestions shed light on the concerns that survey respondents have as information consumers including the lack of trust in news and information transparency, accuracy and objectivity, the lack of representation and inclusiveness and the scarcity of available options for new information sources. While more than 10 alternative media outlets have emerged in the last 3 years in Lebanon, the last point suggests that 75% of the survey respondents are not aware of these new sources of information.

Trust in the media

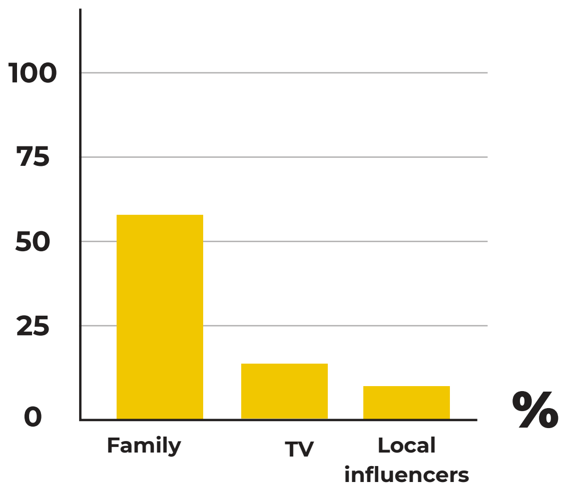
Traditional Media

When asked about their perception on the objectivity and trustworthiness of news broadcasted by traditional media outlets, around 40% of survey respondents said they consider traditional media outlets to be 'biased' or 'very biased' sources of information, thus they do not trust it. This perception is shared equally across genders and different age groups (32.4% women, 38.3% of men; 37.8 % of 18–30-year-old, 31.4% of 31–40-year-old, 33.8% of 40–50-year-old, and 36.6% of 51 and above). This lack of trust is particularly high in Akkar (59.7%), Mount Lebanon (43.6%), Nabatieh (42.3%) and Beqaa (33.2%). While trust is generally low, younger audiences between 18 and 40 years old consider traditional media outlets even less as objective than the older generation.

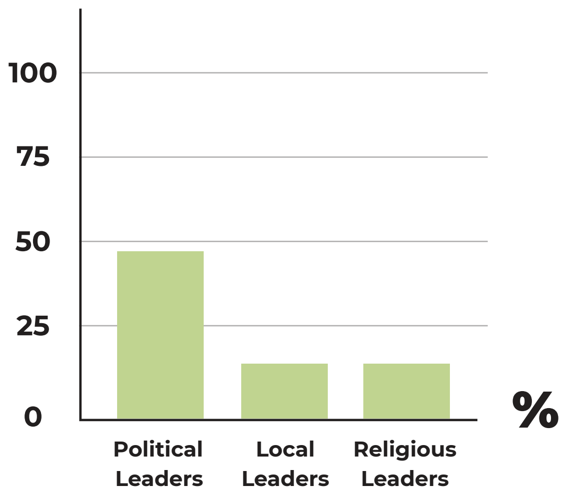
> False news is often shared on WhatsApp. Groups on WhatsApp recently shared invalid information regarding Riad Salameh's decisions which were confusing to me and made me not know what to believe
>
> - Participant in Beqaa Youth FGD.

> What matters is the source of the news, more than the platform on which it has been shared.
>
> - Participant in the North and Akkar youth FGD.

With regards to local news, survey respondents were asked what their most trusted source of information is, and the top three most trusted sources are friends and family, followed by television and local influencers. This suggests that respondents are more likely to refer to people they know than the media as they considered them to be more credible and have a stronger sense of what is happening on the ground. Asked about their least trusted sources of local news sources, survey respondents specifically mentioned political leaders as they believe them to be biased and unprofessional.



MOST TRUSTED SOURCES FOR LOCAL NEWS



LEAST TRUSTED SOURCES FOR LOCAL NEWS

Similarly, women and youth civil society actors have little trust in traditional media even though they have expressed that they do rely on mainstream media, particularly TV, as a popular source of information. Yet, they are aware of the political affiliations of each TV channel, as well as the communication motives that underpin them, and thus are less likely to engage with shows presented by them. They mentioned that the determinants of trusting a piece of information relies on 1) the publishing source, 2) its history and presence in the country and 3) the platform it's being disseminated.

> I don't like to follow traditional media outlets and I do not trust it, it being a TV Channel, a Radio or a News Paper. Each traditional outlet has its own set of political and economic affiliations, and package the news based on it in a way that serves their own interests and agenda. These outlets are sectarian, racist, sexist, discriminatory and definitely not objective.
>
> - Participant in the Beirut Mount Lebanon Women FGD.

> **In my opinion there is no independent media outlet. Each outlet is biases (either to the ruling elite or to people). traditional media outlets like Manar, MTV, LBCI are biased to politicians and what serves their own interests. Alternative media outlets like Daraj, Gherbal and Megaphone are biased towards people and operate with values like equality and transparency.**
>
> **– Participant in Beqaa Youth FGD.**

Social Media

With regards to social media, it is the go-to source of information for up-to-date news. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are the most used, as they feature news articles from different sources on the same topic, this enables users to access multiple sources and choose the most trusted one. Women and youth civil society actors strongly expressed an appreciation for the engagement options that these platforms offer (reactions, comments, sharing, reporting, etc.).

As for WhatsApp, its consumption rates were reported to be very high, yet trust reported to be very low. Many participants (60%) mentioned they are subscribed to multiple WhatsApp groups to receive notifications of events and community updates that include social, political, economic news, and family news. However, 50% of survey respondents do not consider WhatsApp groups to be a trusted source of information. That is mainly because often the information they receive comes from an unknown source and can become viral without it being fact-checked. Fake news is rapidly spread, which triggers doubts, fear of security breaches and leads to higher levels of misinformation among information receivers. Furthermore, participants expressed their concerns over the ways in which WhatsApp manages user data online, especially after the massive digital migration the platform's privacy policy has caused. A lot of participants are critical of the way that WhatsApp stored encrypted messages and believe that Facebook has access to this data. Hence, while it provides plenty of information around various topics, information received and shared via WhatsApp is considered uncontrollable, untraceable, and thus untrustworthy.

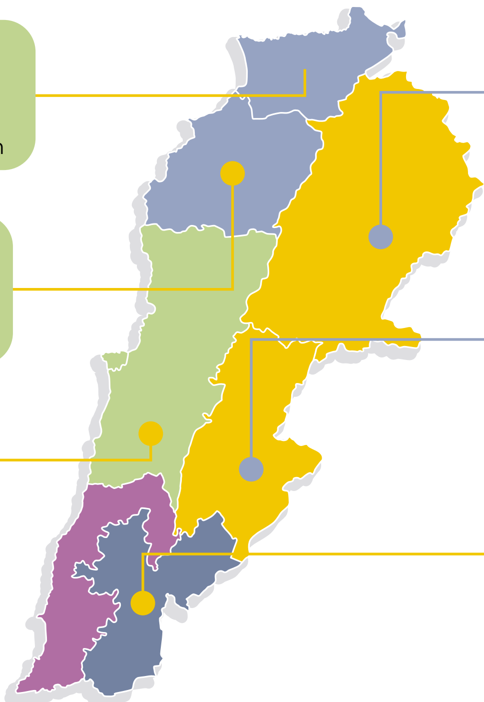
Alternative Media

Among the 25% of respondents who were familiar and aware of alternative media outlets, 47% said they would trust and rely on these outlets, 28% reported hesitance about trusting them, and 24% were not willing to trust these outlets. The map further elaborates on trust levels across surveyed governorates.

Akkar
- **15.5%** are willing to trust them
- **57.8%** are hesitant to trust them
- **26.7%** are not willing to trust them

North Lebanon
- **51.2%** are willing to trust them
- **9.3%** are hesitant to trust them
- **39.5%** are not willing to trust them

Mount Lebanon
- **57.1%** are willing to trust them
- **3.6%** are hesitant to trust them
- **39.3%** are not willing to trust them



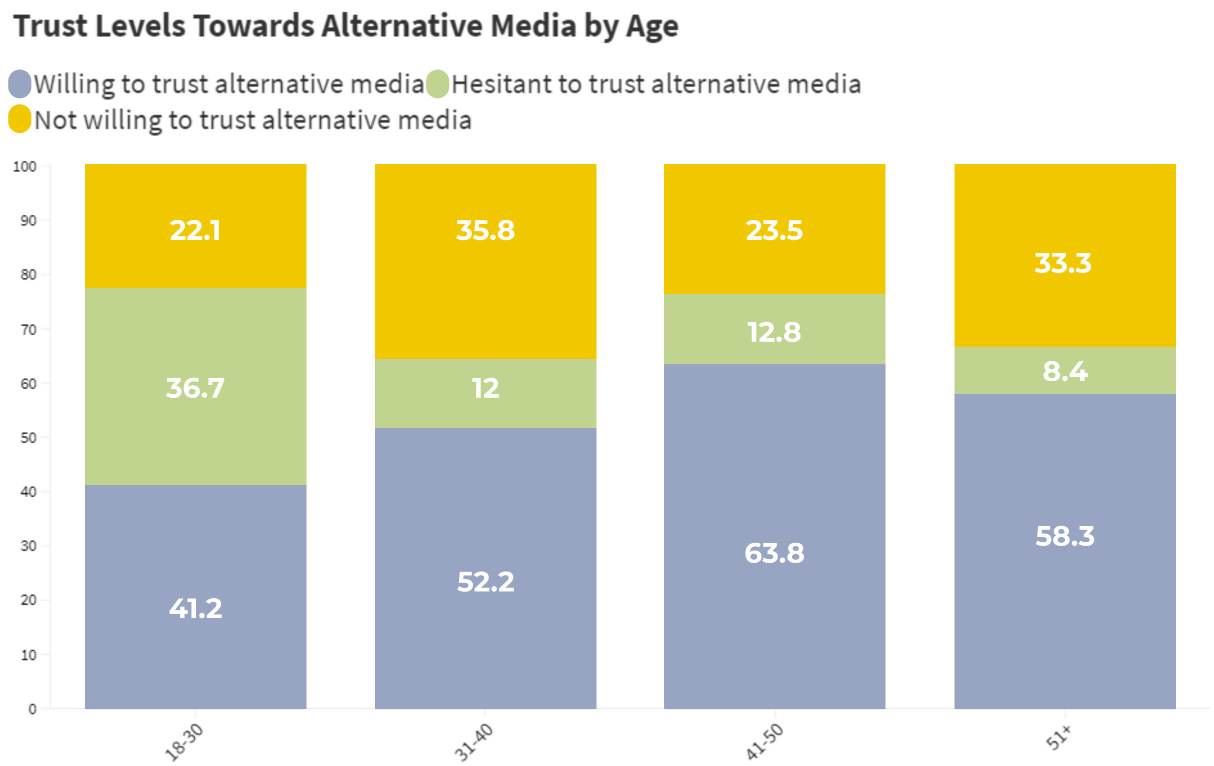
Beqaa
- **26.4%** are willing to trust them
- **57.8%** are hesitant to trust them
- **15.8%** are not willing to trust them

Baalbek-Hermel
- **75.6%** are willing to trust them
- **9.8%** are hesitant to trust them
- **14.6%** are not willing to trust them

Nabatieh
- **54%** are willing to trust them
- **18%** are hesitant to trust them
- **28%** are not willing to trust them

Trust Levels Towards Alternative Media by Governorates

The graph below shows trust levels across surveyed age groups.



As for women and youth civil society actors, even though they are hard critiques of alternative media outlets, they strongly emphasize the importance of their existence as an alternative to the traditional outlets that they hardly trust. They believe that emerging alternative media outlets (such as Megaphone, Political Pen, Legal Agenda, Daraj and Gherbal Initiative) are a more trusted public watchdog than traditional media outlets and that they offer a more in-depth approach to topics. However, a fragile trust was observed across all areas and among women and youth. Interestingly, surveys' data has also revealed this fragile trust among youth. For instance, few participants report consuming Megaphone, Daraj and Political Pen but place little trust in their content for reasons related to perceived radicalism in their vision of change, persistent focus on discrediting traditional media outlets, having a dominant elitist and academic approach.

Moreover, some participants question the representation of these alternative media outlets because they believe it mainly targets youth with particular point of views and is thus not inclusive and representative. They also complain that a big portion of their content is "recycled" from news published by traditional media outlets. Other participants trust individual independent journalists (like Jad Ghosn and Riad Kobeissi) over media outlets because they believe they can be more objective and provide deep and comprehensive analysis. Lastly, while most participants recognize the importance of alternative media outlets challenging the status quo and debunking misinformation, and disinformation, they believe that these outlets need to improve their reach, representation, coverage and get closer to people.

Alternative media outlets need to strengthen their relationship with their audiences and improve how they are perceived and trusted, especially among younger audiences aged between 18 and 30 years old. It also insinuates that alternative media outlets need to further build on their expansion efforts in Mount Lebanon and the North were people expressed interest and willingness in supporting and trusting these outlets despite low levels of awareness levels in these governorates.

4.3 Widening the reach of media outlets to target audiences at scale

Following the review of the audience data and an examination of the capacity of alternative media outlets' capacity to reach audiences, three key findings were identified that showed opportunities for media outlets to reach broader audiences at scale:

Awareness of the media outlets is high among a small group of audiences

Participants from the FGDs saw alternative media outlets as a source of information that counters the discourse provided by traditional media and is a tool for validating what they have heard on local channels in Lebanon. However, awareness of the media outlets is lower among survey respondents, and their engagement with the content is minimal.

Alternative media outlets manage to have high online reach and continue to do so exponentially. Their social media sites in particular have made it possible for online audiences to comment, share their opinions and request content directly from producers. This level of engagement and interactivity is unique to alternative media outlets and gives them an advantage over traditional media in Lebanon. Despite this however, media outlets are challenged with understanding their audiences better as they lack the skills to get audience data and information on their media preferences, motives, and political and social attitudes. Consequently, their platforms' reach is particularly limited to an audience group who may already have a critical view of traditional media, which results in an echo chamber or social media bubble. More in-depth information on audience could help media outlets to broaden their audience base and better plan their targeting in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, location, political background, and interests.

Opportunities for engaging new audiences and influencing the "moveable middle"

According to recent audience research studies, a new methodology for understanding the distribution of audiences for most media outlets can typically be categorized into three groups; the "persuadable", these are audiences who are already engaged with alternative media outlet and believe they have an important role to play in society. Often this represents around 25% of all audiences. The second category, also known as "the moveable middle", typically refers to audiences who are not strong followers of alternative media outlets but can potentially be targeted and moved to become loyal followers. This group typically represents around 50% of audiences and can be easily influenced or persuaded by media outlets if targeted successfully. Finally, the third category refers to "non-persuaders", these represent audiences who are not eager to engage with alternative media sources and thus, are not easily persuaded by their outreach or content[9]. Audience engagement strategies that aim to target the moveable middle can help increase audience reach and improve their impact at scale.

9. "Stories of Change; Working with the movable middle" Social Change Initiative- https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/stories-of-change-working-with-the-moveable-middle

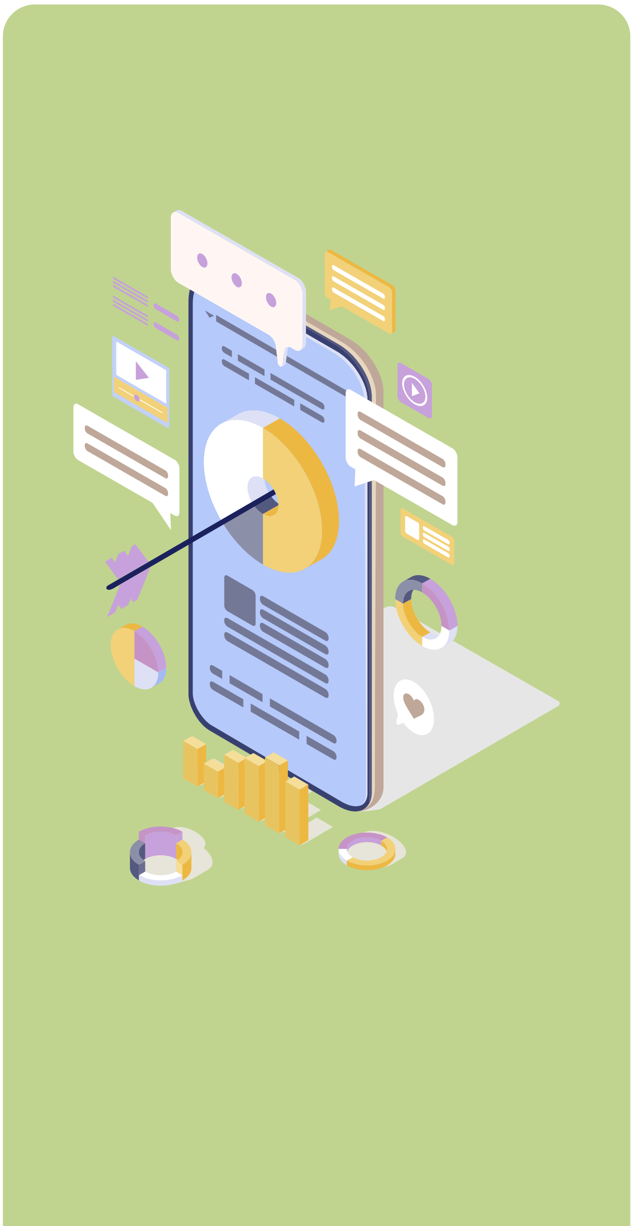
The analysis of the survey data and focus group discussions indicates that the research participants are willing to trust new media sources, regardless of their unfamiliarity with them, and are keen to hear new voices in the media that are not associated with political parties or representative of political and religious leaders. The desire to share opinions online was also expressed by both the survey respondents and FGD participants.

Social media platforms are an increasingly popular medium for reaching audiences for all media as they provide direct access to audiences online, and an opportunity for producers to be exposed to public opinions. Social media sites provide an opportunity for media outlets to use their presence online to reach new audience groups online, particularly on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The potential to reach audiences that might be ambivalent towards media outlets in order to influence their opinions is high, especially that the nature of the content and media formats created by alternative media outlets corresponds to what survey respondents and participants from the FGDs has reported as their primary preference for consuming news digitally: short video clips and mobile phone notifications, a format commonly voted for by the participants in this study as two of the most commonly used formats by alternative media outlets.

The research study showed that television continues to be among the most popular media formats particularly for survey respondents who prefer it over social media for obtaining news. Television continues to play an important role for this audience group when it comes to breaking news and learning about current events in the country. Thus, one opportunity might be for alternative media outlets, or their journalists, to partner with specific TV shows to cover investigative stories and share findings. This would help improve the audience reach for the alternative media outlets and make new audiences aware of their presence and services.

Improving reach and engaging a new audience base

Alternative media outlets will need to find new marketing strategies for enhancing their reach online and break out of the silo of only engaging with audiences that appear to be already bought into their mission. The research suggests that large groups of audiences are still unaware of the presence of alternative media outlets online, particularly younger audiences' bracket and those located in governates outside Beirut. The key reasons for their lack of reach appear to be due to poor targeted advertising online, as much of the marketing methods currently used by media outlets are specifically targeted at engaging audiences already



aware of media outlets. Another influencing factor is the lack of interest among survey respondents to engage in topics about public affairs online, showing a preference for more economic and social topics instead which many alternative media outlets do not cover frequently.

Alternative media outlets have the potential to increase their existing audience base and engage new types of audience groups, particularly through their social media channels. This can be achieved by capturing the media habits of new audiences (particularly those aged above 30 years old and those living in Beqaa, Mount Lebanon and Nabatiyeh) and by aligning their media strategies to target their preferences better. Additionally, an analysis of the opinions and comments shared on their social media platforms will improve their understanding of their existing audience base and how best to engage them further. Such engagement analysis would also help alternative media outlets to better understand the needs of their existing audience, their concerns and how to strengthen the relationship with them, especially that a fragile trust was observed among both survey and FGD participants. Finally, creating a broader content strategy that includes topics that go beyond political and social analysis in the country could also attract the interest of new audiences. Recommendations for how best to improve audience reach are detailed in the next section.

5. Implications and recommendations

The following section provides recommendations for improving the performance and capacity of alternative media outlets in Lebanon and is directed at different stakeholders.

Recommendations for donor agencies:

- **Consider more long-term, core and flexible funding to support alternative media outlets–** provide unrestricted funds to media outlets to be able to support their running costs and manage a team for staff to deliver services. This would enable media outlets to build their capacity and at the same time explore new methods of funding. It would also strengthen these organizations, allow them to better respond to changes, make deeper impact and worry less about their survival.

- **Support alternative media outlets with innovation funds –** Innovation grants would allow media outlets to explore new methods of journalism and build their capacity to experiment with new and creative ways of working to engage audiences at scale.

- **Contribute to knowledge exchange and learning** through supporting alternative media outlets' capacity building & development, particularly on fundraising and investigative journalism - Training support media outlets to diversify their business models and exploring other options of funding, such as advertising models, alternative digital payment systems that provides returns, and service provision. Training on different methods of journalism would support them to further improve their research approaches and introduce new storytelling approaches to their work.

Recommendations for alternative media outlets

- **Diversity funding models –** Introduce multiple sources of revenue and explore funding from non-profit and the private sector. One example of an alternative media outlet with diverse income is Megaphone because it was able to secure grants from international aid agencies to support their core costs and support multiple editorial projects.

- **Improve organizational strategy & missions -**

Document organizational strategies and vision of the media outlets, to ensure audiences see the vision and mission statements clearly. This would allow media outlets to develop their overall vision and improve their fundraising strategy against it.

- **Seek legal support to improve their legal status and increase fundings opportunities–** Media outlets need to be more aware of their legal rights to operate in Lebanon as media organizations and improve their access to legal services and support in the country. This can be done by understanding their legal rights, existing media laws and initiatives to support them, and processes for registration.
- **Strengthen relationships with existing audience-** understand audience's concerns and perception, especially among younger audiences aged between 18 and 30 years old.
- **Expand geographical reach-** alternative media outlets need to better determine and plan their geographical targeting. Findings suggest that Mount Lebanon and the North could be strategic targets since people there had expressed interest and willingness in supporting and trusting alternative media outlets.
- **Improve marketing strategies and understanding of audiences' engagement online -** Support in building digital systems and research frameworks to improve their knowledge of audience access to information, and their content preferences. Social media marketing training, and data science training would help to improve their relationships with audiences.
- **Improve content strategies to include new topics and digital formats** that resonates better with their audience's interests, concerns, and preferences - Develop new topics and themes that appeal to wider audiences and go beyond investigative journalism and include topics on economic development in order to engage younger audiences. The recommended formats to improve engagement include the short video forms and social media stories, podcasts.

Recommendations for media development organizations

- **Encourage and facilitate cooperation, peer to peer learning, networking, and collaboration among alternative media outlets-** Much of the media outlets that exist are working independently and have yet to network other media outlets carrying out the same objectives. Creating a network for media outlets would help them to draw on each other for support and learn from their work collectively and advocate for change at scale.
- **Support alternative media outlets develop their organizational, financial, thematic, audience reach and engagement capacities-** Training on social media marketing methods and distribution could improve media outlets

presence on social networks that target audiences online with low access to alternative sources. Furthermore, training on improving their approach to investigative journalism will support them to create new ways of engaging audiences and provide alternative voices to the existing media landscape. Training media outlets on how to capture direct audience feedback online and evaluate existing datasets and online performance would help media outlets build a better relationship with their existing audiences and increase audience engagement. Media organizations could support media outlets to improve their approach to journalism by linking them to international media outlets with the same experience.

Areas for future research for Internews and Maharat

- **Capture audience reach and engagement online through a nationally representative survey -** A survey with a nationally representative sample would help to determine with accuracy audiences' levels of awareness of media outlets and help to better understand the reasons why audiences are not being reached effectively. This would help media organizations better understand the needs of mass audiences and support media outlets to target them better.

- **Capture the impact of media outlets on advocacy and mobilizing change -** A research study that examines the impact of independent media campaigns on political movements parties would help media organizations to better understand their potential at creating political change and mobilizing communities. Research on how communities have used media to mobilize change would be needed to capture insight into understanding that relationship further. This would support media organizations to better understand the role of alternative media to create political change more broadly.

- **Advertising Industry Analysis -** A study that examines the market size of audiences, and their potential marketing potential, as well as access to data can be beneficial to, advertisers and determine whether advertising could be a new source of income for alternative media platforms. This would help media organizations identify partners to support media outlets to diversify their funding.

Appendix

1. Audience survey & Focus Group Discussions

Rationale for the location selection for the in-person interviews

Governorate	Village	Background
Akkar	Kobayat	Voices underrepresented in traditional media and not likely to be heard on me-.dia platforms
		Type of community (Christian maronite - (minority in a Muslim Governorate
		Low level of media penetration. This is based on findings from the literature review
Baalbek-Hermel	Deir El Ahmar	Underrepresented in media
		(Misrepresented in media (bias
		Type of community (Christian Maronite - (minority in a Muslim Governorate
		Low level of media penetration
Beqaa	Zahle	Underrepresented in media
		Type of community (Christian Catholic - (minority in a Muslim Governorate
		Low level of media penetration

Mount Lebanon	Iqlim Kharroub	Underrepresented in media
		Type of community (Sunni - minority in a (Druze District
		Low level of media penetration
	Lasa - Jbeil	Underrepresented in media
		Type of community (Shiite - minority in a (Chrisitan District
		Low level of media penetration
Nabatieh	Hasbaya	Underrepresented in media
		Type of community (Druze - minority in a (Shiite Governorate
		Low level of media penetration
North Lebanon	Jabal Mohsen	(Misrepresented in media (bias
		Type of community (Allawite- minority in (a Sunni Governorate
		Low level of media penetration
South Lebanon	Marjeyoun	Underrepresented in media
		Type of community (Christian minority in (a Muslim Governorate
		Low level of media penetration

Breakdown of surveys conducted in each governorate

Governorate	Population size (IDAL, (2016	Sample size (95% Confi-dence Level, 7% Confi-(dence Interval
Akkar	330,000	196
Baalbek-Hermel	416,427	196
Beqaa	519,607	196
Mount Lebanon	448,376	(Chouf) 196
		(Keserwan) 196
Nabatieh	276,285	196
North Lebanon	949,197	196
South Lebanon	718,765	196
Total target number of surveys		1568

Representation of focus group discussions

Area	Coverage	Target audience (composition and (number of participants	
		(Women (1 FGD	Youth (mixed (group (FGD 1)
Beirut and Mount Lebanon	Beirut and Mount Lebanon	4	4
North	North & Akkar	4	4
South	Nabatieh & South	4	4
Beqaa	Beqaa & Baalbek el Hermel	4	4

2. List of surveyed villages

Kobayat (Akkar), Deir el Ahmar (Baalbek el Hermel), Zahle (Beqaa), Iqlim el Kharroub and Lasa (Mount Lebanon), Hasbaya (South), Jabal Mohsen (North) and Marjeyoun (South).

Annex II: Sample selection

1. Alternative media outlets – A number of media outlets which were not financially supported by political parties or private businesses and/or the banking sector were identified during the literature review. A total of fourteen media outlets were selected for this research and categorized into two groups: those targeting a national or regional audience and those targeting local or community-based audiences in Lebanon. The table below summarizes the list of the selected media outlets.

	Nature of Content	Media Outlet	Language	Frequency of Publication
LOCAL AUDIENCE	News	• Public Source	Arabic & English	Weekly
		• Khabar b Story • Lebanon news 365	Arabic	Daily
	News and culture	• The Beirut Banyan	English	Daily
	News & human rights	• Megaphone	Arabic & English	Daily
	Education, social and cultural issues	• Hadi Production	Arabic	Daily
REGIONAL AUDIENCE	News	• Sharika w Lakan • Khateera	Arabic	Daily
	Gender	• Raseef 22	Arabic & English	Daily
		• Ana Hon	Arabic	Weekly
		• Rehla • Maharat News • Naked Politics • Bchoufic	Arabic	Daily

2. Survey respondents – surveys were conducted with selected participants in eight villages across Lebanon's governorates with the exception of Beirut10. The villages are: Kobayat (Akkar), Deir el Ahmar (Baalbek el Hermel), Zahle (Beqaa), Iqlim el Kharroub and Lasa (Mount Lebanon), Hasbaya (South), Jabal Mohsen (North) and Marjeyoun (South). A list of the selected villages and the minorities they represent are available in Appendix 1. Villages were chosen according to the following criteria:

   a. Underrepresentation of community voices in the media (based on literature review and contextual reality)

   b. Misrepresentation of community groups in media (existing bias of sectarian[11] nature)

10. According to Literature Review, most audience research conducted based their samples in Beirut, as such, and given the abundance of audience data residing in Beirut, the team decided to leave the capital out of the field survey population.

11. Each Governorate is dominated by a certain sect. The other sects are thus considered minorities and when outlets and media cover those areas, they tend to leave out the voices, opinions, and needs of those religious groups and villages in those areas. .

c. Low level of media penetration (measured by the prevailing income level[12] and the existence or absence of local media outlets based on literature review).

The sample consisted of 1,568 respondents and was equally split between the two genders (50% males, 50% females). The majority of participants were below the age of 40 years old (approximately 75% of the survey participants of the sample). There were four age groups for the survey: 0 – 17; 18 – 30; 31 – 40; 41- 50.

3. Focus group discussions with women and youth civil society actors – Ten focus group discussions were carried out with women and youth from Beirut, Mount Lebanon area, the Beqaa area, the Northern area, and the Southern area.

Women and youth who are engaged in the public discourse, aware of alternative media outlets, and are considered influential in various fields (politics, media, social work, civil society organizations) were selected for the sample. They represent a sample that requests more accurate, objective, inclusive and clear information and news and demand quality journalism.

In each area, two focus group discussions were facilitated, with the exception of Beirut and Mount Lebanon area where four focus groups were conducted as they were relatively larger. All the discussions were hosted online through video and recorded for analysis purposes. The table below describes the division of each FGD conducted.

12. The conducted literature review concerning financial viability, suggested that people sitting in low-income brackets have less access to good quality internet, digital devices, and telecommunication mediums. Moreover, and because media outlets are interested in maximizing their profits, targeting areas with poor income levels is not deemed profitable enough, and therefore, these areas are less targeted. The survey was also meant to examine this assumption.

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