

Lebanon - Media Landscape

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Table of contents

- Introduction
- Media
 - Print
 - Radio
 - Television
 - Digital Media
 - Social Networks
 - Opinion Makers
 - Sources
- Organisations
 - Trade Unions
 - Journalist Associations
 - News Agencies
 - Audience measurement organisations
 - Sources
- Policies
 - Media legislation
 - Accountability systems
 - Regulatory authorities
 - Sources
- Education
 - Universities and schools
 - Professional development
 - Media Development Organisations
 - Sources
- Telecommunications
 - Mobile network ecosystem
 - Company profiles
 - Main trends
 - Mobile coverage
 - Mobile ownership
 - Sources
- Innovation
 - Landscape analysis
 - Profiles of main tech parks, accelerators, hackathons

- Sources
 - Traditional forms of communication
 - Summary
 - Sources
 - Conclusions
 - 5.1 Conclusion
 - 5.2 References
-

Overview

Once viewed as the most stable and safe country in the Middle East, Lebanon has been deeply affected by recent regional and internal crises, which have had a negative impact on the stability and safety of the country. A deep and multi-faceted crisis struck Lebanese politics, economy and society, culminated into the eruption of protests throughout the country since October 2019. The turmoil brought to the government resignation and to the creation of a new cabinet in January 2020. Moreover, the economic default occurred in March, increased the instability in the country and revived the protest movements. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemics, even if did not create an extensive damage in terms of casualties and pressure on the Lebanese health sector, has had a strong impact on social and economic conditions.

This delicate moment of transition had repercussions on the media environment as well. The Lebanese media landscape has usually been an arena of political patronage and domestic and foreign influence peddling. However, the deep economic crisis and the emergence of several independent actors fostered by the challenge to the status quo posed by the protest, does not give much hope for a change. The media sector faces the risk of flattening over the polarising tendencies based on confessional and ideological lines, tending to prefer populist narratives to cope with the financial and legitimacy crisis.

The Lebanese media sector is facing a profound crisis and there are many journalists and media staff, working in the local and pan-Arab media outlets based in Beirut, who have not been paid for long time or have lost their jobs. *As-Safir*, a historic newspaper, was forced to close, and *An-Nahar* has weakened and had to restructure. Even *Al-Arabiya* and *Al-Jazeera* offices in Beirut and in the region have reduced the number of their staff members. The only media outlets that resist are those financed by large investors, linked to political-sectarian actors in the region.

In the 1970s, Lebanon offered a unique cultural openness and freedom of expression. Beirut was the region's media hub and the target of important funding for its publications. Investors included Iraq's former president Saddam Hussein, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, deposed Tunisian president Ben Ali, as well as Saudi royals. Lebanese newspapers were read throughout the Arab world and used to feature articles and op-eds by personalities from all over the region. Gulf countries, but also Iraq and Libya, used to finance Lebanese newsrooms to carry out and support their political battles. As a result, the injection of foreign funding was abundant and steady. Nowadays, with the global economic crises and the new channels of the Gulf, that money has been inexorably vanishing.

From the second half of the 19th century, decades before the creation of independent Lebanon in 1946, Beirut boasted pre-eminence in the surrounding Arab regions for the freedom of expression enjoyed by its several newspapers. These are indeed the oldest and most important in the area. Even today, the smallest country in the Middle East is an exception compared to its Arab neighbours in terms of pluralism of the press and broad range of readers.

Despite a history of turmoil, Lebanon's well-educated and critical population has led to one of the most diverse and sophisticated press and media landscapes in the Arab Levant. With newspapers and media outlets in four different languages (Arabic, French, English and Armenian), Beirut has a vibrant media community with relatively high professional standards and free from State control. The Lebanese press does, however, reflect the limitations of the sectarian system that dominates the country, where a newspaper or a TV station is more often than not identified with one of the main religious and political groups.

With the media being entangled to the national politics and international influence peddling, journalists are often required to act like political activists. On the one hand the Lebanese State does not control media outlets, contrary to what happens in many other Arab countries; however, on the other hand, political parties have the power to influence and direct the majority of Lebanese media institutions, which therefore reflect the country's sectarian politics and all too often serve as the mouthpiece for political propaganda.

Since media outlets do not rely on readership, but rather on investors as a source of revenue, there is little – if any – interest in producing quality journalism. Moreover, the deep and long-lasting economic crisis did not spare the media and in particular the newspapers. The media sector started to suffer heavily from 2016, when shortage of funding hit several companies and outlets, with the consequent inability of producing quality content and paying wages. Regardless of the political affiliation, the whole sector has reported negative trends and suffered from financial problems, reducing the number, the quality and the circulation of newspapers. The situation faced by Lebanese media reached a critical dimension, as it was defined “free falling” (*The Guardian*) and “dying” (*Middle East Eye*).

It is unfortunately a common practice to bribe journalists to publish a certain piece of information, or – on the contrary – to avoid any further analysis on specific matters. With the financial crisis newsrooms have been facing, it is even harder for journalists to resist such offers.

Lebanese syndicates have asked the government to support the country's media. Former minister of information Ramzi Joreige announced in 2016 the creation of a \$10m fund to back Lebanese newspapers, but the plan was never voted on in parliament. With the creation of a new cabinet in late January 2020, the newly appointed minister of Information is Manal Abdul Samad, an expert on taxation and fiscal policies, with experience in university teaching. In the first months of her mandate, she showed commitment in proposing reform plans for the information and media sector in Lebanon. Considering the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemics, the minister expressed concern on the accuracy of news broadcasted and the intention of drafting a plan to overview and regulate the spread of fake news regarding the virus. In May 2020, she presented a plan for the complete restructuring of the Ministry of Information and the public media sector, which is still under the government's consideration.

With the escalation of the conflict in neighbouring Syria and with the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in some regions between Iraq and Syria, Lebanon has been increasingly caught in profound political divisions mirroring the regional fault lines. In the early times of the Syrian war, the political-sectarian parties in parliament were divided over the conflict, being deeply connected to one player or another in the region. In particular, the impact of Hezbollah's open and numerically significant involvement in Syria since 2012 has had an impact not just on the battlefield, where the Syrian government and its allies have gained momentum in many areas, but also in Lebanon. Here rising sectarian tensions have undermined the country's security and stability, with spillovers of violence from the Syrian conflict. A number of bomb attacks and deadly clashes between supporters and opponents of the Syrian president occurred mainly in Tripoli and Beirut (the twin attacks of August 2013 to two mosques in Tripoli are the deadliest in Lebanon since the end of the civil war). Moreover, the influx of Syrian refugees fleeing the war in their home country have resulted in strained relations between locals and newcomers. The

UN estimates that more than one million Syrian refugees are hosted in Lebanon, which is approximately one fourth of all the people living in the country. At the same time and for more than two years, since President Michel Suleiman's mandate finished in May 2014, until October 2016, when the parliament eventually elected Michel Aoun as his successor, a power vacuum paralysed Lebanon's political institutions. A similar situation occurred after the political elections that took place in May 2018, when the political factions spent almost eight months to find an agreement on how to form a new cabinet. It survived for less than a year, as the prime minister Saad Hariri resigned in October 2019, following the demands of the protestors. The latest cabinet was formed on January 2020 by the new appointed prime minister Hassan Diab. The prolonged decisional lockdown of 2018 and the discontinuity within the country's organization and leadership, deepened the already existing political and economic crisis, leaving the country without the implementation of coherent and credible policies.

Not only have the local media been deeply influenced by this dangerous polarisation, but they have gradually become sharp tools of propaganda in the hands of opposing Lebanese political and sectarian groups, pursuing their specific political agendas. Today none of the newspapers, TVs and radios can be described as immune to the ongoing conflict, and very few attempt to maintain a neutral attitude. The Lebanese press corps has also suffered many casualties over recent years due to targeted attacks and armed conflicts, mostly connected to the war in Syria and its counter effects in Lebanese areas close to the porous border. With the Syrian conflict reaching more advanced stages, the question of re-patriation of the refugees to Syria became one of the most discussed topics and yet another tool of identity politics propaganda. Media outlets close to the governing coalition would praise the safe conditions of Syria, stressing the burden that refugees would cause on Lebanese economy. Conversely, others would underline the impossible conditions that the Syrians would face on the other side of the border.

Concerning the most recent developments in the Lebanese internal affairs, the media sector faces a complicated situation concerning the way of covering and talking about the anti-government protests. The sector has therefore been divided among those networks that have been simply covering, encouraging or downplaying the phenomenon, highlighting the political parties' power over the Lebanese media. For example, TV channels close to the president and to the governing parties, broadcasted other programs ignoring the serious clashes going on in the country. Other outlets, like *Al-Manar* and the newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, pledged their support to the government, while other popular networks such as *LBCI*, *NewTV* and *MTV* maintained a close presence within the streets encouraging the people to speak.

With the 1996 implementation of the Audiovisual Media Law (no. 382 of 1994), Lebanon became the first Arab State to authorise private radio and TV stations to operate within its borders (although a few private channels have existed since 1975). However, a huge number of small radios and TVs were subsequently declared "illegal" and thus closed, with the new licenses – due also to their extremely high fees – being given to corporate conglomerates linked to influential politicians.

According to the Internews Network Report of April 2009, many media institutions suffer from a lack of human resources, written job descriptions, organisational policies and regular performance appraisals and rely heavily on part-time staff. Moreover, 40 percent of Beirut-based media has no mission statement or organisational chart.

While about 45 percent of the surveyed organisations has over half of their staffs made up of women – notably in broadcast media – few of the women are admitted into the male-dominated areas of political journalism. Interestingly, 29 percent of the organisations do not employ women at all.

Politicians account for up to a third of many media boards of directors and often use these outlets as tools to promote their platforms, influence public opinion and seek public support. Overall, they have the power to shape the entire media system: From the hiring process, to content development and internal governance. It comes as no surprise that in the majority of the cases when journalists are sued for defamation, the plaintiffs are usually politicians. Journalists charged with defamation or

dissemination of false information are normally fined, but a prison sentence is still legally possible. The Internews report also found that most of the larger Lebanese media “proved to be very opaque and resistant towards revealing information about their internal operations and management.”

In addition to all this, a Censorship Bureau within General Security controls the content of the information outlets. However, being its regulations vague and lacking clear standards, a high level of inconsistency and subjectivity characterise the whole censorship system. *MARCH*, a Lebanese NGO, has researched and compiled cases of government censorship since the 1940’s in an online “Virtual Museum of Censorship”. Moreover, the same NGO has published since 2018, a series of reports to foster the public knowledge on the Lebanese censorship system, raising awareness on freedom of speech, digital rights, and to provide legislative insights.

Media

Print

Historically, Lebanon has had one of the highest ratios of private newspapers per head in the Arab world. However, with the rise in popularity and the rapid development of online media outlets, pan-Arab TVs and news sharing in social networks, printed newspapers have become increasingly less popular, causing a decrease in advertising revenues and sales. If this is true all over the world, in Lebanon the situation is more complicated. In fact, since their creation, Lebanese media have been receiving funding from foreign investors, who pursue their interest in the country’s politics. The withdrawal of foreign funding from the Lebanese media industry started when Gulf countries launched their own TV channels and networks and it intensified more recently with the global financial crisis and the fall in oil prices. For instance, *As-Safir*, which used to be one of the most popular newspaper selling over 50,000 copies a day in 2010, was only selling about 10,000 copies by 2016.

Anyway, if one stops at a newsstand in Beirut he will still be surprised at the plethora of daily, weekly, monthly local newspapers and magazines, that are offered to the reader. A daily newspaper costs from €0.50 to €1. For those who cannot read Arabic, along with a rich variety of dailies, Lebanon offers a vast repertoire of weeklies and periodicals. Those focusing mainly on internal and regional political affairs and on social gossip (*Al-Hawadeth*, *Al-Jaras*, *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*, *Ash-Shiraa*, *Al-Masira/An-Najwa* – all in Arabic except for the two francophone *L’Hebdo Magazine* and *La Revue du Liban*, alongside with the English-language *Monday Morning*) – are scarcely reliable as journalistic sources, whilst the ones dedicated to business and finance – most of them in English and French (*Executive*, *Lebanon Opportunities*, *Le Commerce du Levant*, *al-Iktissad Wal-Aama*) – include a number of interesting insight features on social, economic and cultural aspects of Lebanon, in each issue.

Beirut, long before it became the capital of Lebanon, was and still is the capital of the so-called free media of the Middle East. The first Arab *Jarida* (newspaper), the Garden of the News (*Hadiqat al-Akhbar*), was published in 1858 in Beirut and was followed by other illustrious gazettes. Since the 19th century, the urban elite has also played a crucial role in establishing some of the most prestigious newspapers in Egypt and in the new destinations of the Arab diaspora, such as Argentina, Brazil, France.

From a legal point of view, Lebanon has two types of licenses: one for political and another for non-political outlets. Following the 1964 press law, the number of periodicals was limited and it has since been stabilised. The Lebanese press includes about 60 licensed political publications, including around ten dailies, almost 40 weeklies and four monthly magazines

reporting a total circulation of 220,000 (2008).

However, there are no accurate figures on circulation and distribution of newspapers in Lebanon and each paper makes self-promoting claims. According to the Ministry of Information, formerly *As-Safir* (The Messenger) and *An-Nahar* (The Day) supposedly were the most read newspapers in Arabic language, with respectively 50,000 and 45,000 issues daily. However, Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, estimated that *An-Nahar's* circulation does not exceed 15,000, a figure consistent with a 2004 [study](#) on Arab media by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In any case, after the recent closure of *As-Safir*, it is fair to say the largest circulation dailies are *An-Nahar* and *Al-Akhbar* (The News, founded in 2006). If on the one hand, *Al-Akhbar* has always been praised for its focus on audacious and historically taboo subjects; on the other hand, it has been widely accused of being the mouthpiece of Hezbollah. Founded in 2003, *Al-Balad* (The Country) also registered a large circulation at an initial stage, which subsequently decreased. It is a commercial newspaper printed in tabloid format. It promotes aggressive and controversial campaigns, focusing on political, social, and cultural issues often in sensationalistic terms.

As-Safir was founded in 1974 and belongs to Talal Salman. For all its history, it has claimed to be “the voice of the voiceless” and throughout the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), it was known for its support to the Palestinian cause and to Arab nationalism. In wider terms, for years, and at least until 1989, it represented the secular left-wing Arab *intelligentsia*, opposed to Washington policies and loyal to pan-Arab ideals. However, in the last decade its orientation partly shifted towards more radical positions, often supporting conservative authoritarian regimes in the region. In March 2016, it was announced that *As-Safir* was to close, due to financial issues, and a final edition was published. However, the newspaper was still in existence until the end of 2016, thanks to a last-minute injection of funding. This proved not to be enough though and, on 31 December 2016, after 42 years in publication, *As-Safir* closed down.

Also *An-Nahar* newspaper could soon follow the fate of *As-Safir*, due to the economic crisis that has hit many local and regional Beirut-based media outlets. Established in 1933 by the Orthodox Christian Tueni family, *An-Nahar* has been characterised by a liberal orientation, which, without denying its roots and Arab affiliations, looks to Europe and the West in general as a political and cultural reference point. Nowadays, this historical newspaper has gradually lost its role of the leading public voice of a certain segment of the Lebanese intellectual landscape. *An-Nahar* is no longer a reference point for the readership, in fact it has become a collectanea of local affairs news and articles concerning the immutable domestic policy debate among the usual political/sectarian actors. As many observers and readers have pointed out, the paper now “is neither fish nor fowl”.

Nowadays, in addition to *An-Nahar*, the pro-Hezbollah *Al-Akhbar* and the commercial *Al-Balad*, smaller portions of readers are shared by the francophone *L'Orient-Le Jour* (resulting from the 1971 merger between *L'Orient*, founded in 1904, and *Le Jour* established in 1897) and the English-language *The Daily Star* (1952), which is a valuable news source for local expats and the diaspora. In 2010 a group of entrepreneurs close to the Hariri family bought the newspaper that has since adopted a stance more inclined towards the Future Movement led by current Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Malik Mroue is its chairman, but has no executive role or power. In 2015 *The Daily Star* started charging an online fee of US\$12 a month for readers based outside Lebanon. There is also the pro-Saudi *Al-Mustaqbal* (The Future, established in 1995), which is the organ of the Future Movement and is owned by current prime minister and Lebanese-Saudi business tycoon Saad Hariri, son and political heir of the former premier Rafiq Hariri, killed in a blast in Beirut in 2005.

The latest additions to the Lebanese newspaper scene are *Al-Jumhuriyya* (The Republic) and *Al-Bina'* (The Construction). In fact, these papers were founded respectively in 1924 and 1958, but then their publication was suspended and only recently relaunched, appearing for the first time as daily political newspapers. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party controls *Al-Bina'*, whilst the ownership of *Al-Jumhuriyya* belongs to former Minister of Defence, Elias Murr, from the Murr family's media

empire.

As mentioned before, as a result of “financial difficulties”, *An-Nahar* dismissed 50 employees in September 2009, announcing that in the following months its staff would be reduced from 300 to 220 journalists and print workers. A few months prior to that, also *Al-Akhbar* and *Al-Mustaqbal* terminated the employment of a large number of their staff writers. Moreover, in January 2009 the printing of *The Daily Star* was suspended for two weeks by a Lebanese court order after financial difficulties. The newspaper resumed publishing the following month, thanks to agreements with creditors on payment of accumulating debt. In this context, new business models for the media are being actively considered, with an eye to increased commercialisation, aggressive marketing and online media investments, aimed at regional audiences and competitors.

The decline of the Lebanese press can be understood also by the allocation of advertisement spending. According to a 2015 report of Bank Med on the media and advertising sector, since 2010, advertising expenditure on digital platform have started to grow exponentially, at the expenses of advertisements on newspapers and magazines. This transitional period has witnessed the migration of the printed news to digital platform in order to optimize the expenditures and attract more advertising investments. Since 2016, several are the Lebanese newspapers and magazines that have either completely closed or stopped printing. *As-Safir*, aforementioned as one of the prominent Lebanese newspapers, closed its activity after 42 years of existence. Similarly, *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Anwar* stopped their production after more than 50 years due to financial constraints. In 2019, *Al-Mustaqbal*, the newspaper owned by the Hariri family, suspended its printing and limited its publications on the official website. Same fate was shared more recently by *The Daily star*, which stopped its printing in February 2020.

Radio

By the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), around 180 unlicensed radio stations were on air. The government announced its intention to reorganize and regulate the media sector, which led to the adoption of the Audiovisual Media Law (1994). Quotas and technical criteria for licensing radio stations were established which are yet to be overhauled.

Currently there are five major radio stations in the country and a dozen of small ones, broadcasting to 85 percent of the Lebanese population (2.85 million receivers according to the latest available statistics) in the four main languages spoken in the country: Arabic, English, French, Armenian. Five of them account for the majority of listeners and there are dozens of local radio stations. The majority of the country's radio stations have commercial licenses, broadcasting music, socio-cultural programs and entertainment talk shows. Following the example of television, only a few of them have “class-A” licenses that entitle them to broadcast political content and news (the government owned *Idhaat Lubnan*, then *Sawt Lubnan*, *Sawt ash-Shaab*, *Sawt al-Ghad*, *Sawt Lubnan al-Hurr* and *Idhaat an-Nur*). As is the case for other Lebanese news media, also radio news providers, with the exception of the state-owned *Idhaat Lubnan/Radio Liban* (Radio of Lebanon, one of the first radios in the Arab world, founded in 1939), reflect their different political and religious affiliations.

Sawt Lubnan (Voice of Lebanon, 1975) is the voice of the pro-Western Christian-Maronite 'Lebanese Phalanges' party, while *Idhaat an-Nur* (Radio of Light) is linked to the Shiite pro-Iranian movement Hezbollah. *Sawt al-Ghad* (Voice of Tomorrow, 1997) is owned by the Free Patriotic Movement (Fpm) led by Maronite retired general and Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun, who was elected President of Lebanon at the end of 2016, while *Sawt Lubnan al-Hurr* (Voice of Free Lebanon, 1985) is affiliated with the pro-Western Christian-Maronite 'Lebanese Forces' party; *Sawt ash-Shaab* (Voice of the People, 1987) is controlled by the once-powerful Lebanese Communist Party.

According to the latest available statistics, the leading news radio station is *Sawt al-Ghad* that can boast a 19 percent reach

(2010). On the other hand, *Sawt Lubnan* is the first commercial radio station in the country and it reached 17 percent of the population in 2010. *Sawt Lubnan al-Hurr* ranks third – with 15 percent audience reach in 2010 – and it mainly broadcasts Arabic-language political programs and news bulletins.

In more recent times, Lebanese radio companies have been diversifying their offer and providing a wider range of digital services, with online streaming, dedicated websites and mobile apps. Not only does this enable them to broadcast internationally, it also allows them to take advantage of new technology, like programmatic advertising. However, also this sector is suffering from the repercussions of the economic crisis. A peculiar case is the fate of *Radio One*, which was established in 1983 by Raymond Gaspar and aired daily from Beirut contents in English with a high number of followers (11 million on Facebook) both in Lebanon and abroad. In 2018, Gavin Ford, the host of the popular “The Breakfast Show”, was found dead in his home after having been beaten up, strangled and his apartment robbed. The perpetrators did not have any political intent and the assault was premeditated. The story generated empathy in the public and listener of the radio. Due to financial difficulties *Radio One* remained silent since February 2020, interrupting its shows and programs.

Television

Until the mid-1980s, Lebanon's television scene was limited to two private stations, *La Compagnie Libanaise de Télévision* and *Télé-Orient*. These were acquired by the government in 1977 and merged into one company called *Télé-Liban*.

In 1985, Christian businessmen founded LBC as the mouthpiece of the Lebanese Forces party. Soon, it became the most popular station in the country and its success encouraged other political parties and financiers to venture into the field. Subsequently, TV stations rapidly proliferated until the 1994 Audiovisual Law limited their number to a handful of stations distributed among the major politicians who also represented the major religious sects.

There are nine television broadcast stations in Lebanon. These reach more than 97 percent of the adult Lebanese audience; the country also has five digital cable television companies, *Cable Vision*, *Econet*, *City TV*, *Digiteck* and *UCL*. Although hundreds of thousands of viewers subscribe to cable and satellite services, many providers operate without a license. For instance, in May 2015, eight Lebanese television stations filed a lawsuit against cable and satellite companies, alleging that they violated Articles 87 and 88 of the intellectual property law and Article 6 of the Audiovisual Law by not paying fees for the right to carry the broadcast stations' content.

With the exception of the state-owned and scarcely viewed *Télé-Liban*, all the other eight Lebanese TV stations are directly linked to the different political and religious rival factions of the country (the pro-Western parliamentary majority vs. the pro-Iranian opposition). The result is a general lack of professional standards in reporting local, regional and international events, whilst the news agenda is deeply influenced by the different affiliations. Moreover, the success (and the granting of licences) of these TV stations is directly related to the fortunes of the political parties that support them.

LBC is owned by Pierre Daher with Saudi Prince Walid b. Talal as one of its main shareholders. When in the mid-1980s *LBC* started broadcastings as the first Lebanese private TV, its popularity rapidly breached Lebanon borders. Since 1996, *LBC* started broadcasting internationally, opening *LBC Europe*, *LBC America* and *LBC Australia*, targeting the Lebanese and Arab diaspora. For years and long before the appearance of pan-Arab TV Al Jazeera in 1996, *LBC* was the most-viewed station not only in Lebanon but also in Syria and the entire Middle East. In recent years, its audience share has been declining (54 percent in 2005, 48 percent in 2007, and 43 percent in 2010, AGB-Ipsos Stat). Politically it is one of the stations belonging to the so-called ‘pro-Western’ spheres and its schedule mainly focuses on local talk shows and news programs and imported entertainment formats adapted to the local market.

MTV (Murr Television) belongs to the same sphere of influence. Originally created in 1991 by businessman Gabriel Murr (not

connected to the Michel Murr media group), it was closed under strong Syrian pressures in 2002 and finally re-launched at the beginning of 2009. In September 2009 *MTV* and *LBC* have announced the dismissal of dozens of their employees.

The *Future Television* is owned by the Hariri family and its first TV channel was launched in 1993, right after the first general elections held in the country in the post civil war era. The 1992 elections were dominated by Rafiq Hariri, a long-standing key political figure representing the Saudi interests in Lebanon. It is worth mentioning that the *Future News* headquarter was assaulted (alongside with *Al-Mustaqbal* newspaper) by scores of Hezbollah-led militiamen in central Beirut and forced into closing for some days in May 2008 during the short and bloody Lebanese internal conflict. After these events, the *Future Television* relocated its main premises in a Christian-dominated suburb on the Eastern outskirts of the Lebanese capital for security reasons. In late 2019, the prime minister in office Saad Hariri suspended until further notice the production of *FutureTV*, after having led *Al-Mustaqbal* newspaper to stop printing few months before, due to funding shortage. The suspension is officially intended to conduct a financial restructuring and program a re-launch of the platforms. However, the plan seems unlikely to have an implementation due to the financial crisis and the conditions of the employees, who have been striking for months over unpaid wages.

In the pro-Iranian sphere, *Al-Mayadin* (The Squares) stands out. It is a pan-Arab satellite television channel launched in June 2012 and broadcasting from Beirut. It has partially taken the place of *Al-Manar Tv* (Talifizyun al-Manar) affiliated with the Shiite movement Hezbollah. Its 'beacon' was launched in 1991 with the help of Iranian funds, and its harshly anti-Israel and anti-US rhetoric is now estimated to reach 15 million daily viewers worldwide. Between December 2015 and April 2016, in the midst of raising political and diplomatic tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two major Arab satellite providers – Arabsat and Nilesat – stopped broadcasting *Al-Manar TV* under heavy Saudi pressures.

In addition to *Al-Mayadin* and *Al-Manar*, the pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian government sphere of Lebanese public opinion could count on *NBN* (National Broadcasting Network). This was founded in 1996 by the Shiite speaker of the Parliament and leader of the *Amal* (Hope) movement Nabih Berri. In fact *NBN* is widely and sarcastically known in Lebanon as the acronym of 'Nabih Berri News'. In 2000, it launched its satellite channel in order to reach the Lebanese Shiite diaspora in the Arab World, Africa and Europe. During the anti-government protest, *NBN* started to cover the evolution of the demonstrations and the various squares where they were taking place. Their coverage has been more extensive than *Al-Manar*, attempting to be an alternative to *FutureTV* owned by the Hariri family, once again dragging the political rivalry and competition in the media sector.

Formerly known as *NewTv*, the station has become *Al-Jadid TV* since 2001 (when it was relaunched after it reacquired the broadcasting licence following its forced closure by the government. It is owned by the local business tycoon Tahsin Khayyat and is Lebanon's fastest growing local station. *Al-Jadid TV* has been expanding its audience reach (21 percent in 2005, 29 percent in 2008 and 32 percent in 2010, AGB-Ipsos Stat), climbing from fourth to second rank in two years. It has a populist approach and its growing popularity is partly due to investigative reports of public relevance, which sometimes make it a real embarrassment to the people in power and have caused legal issues to Khayyat.

In the midst of this predominantly Shiite media landscape, the pro-Iranian sphere can also count on the third main Christian channel, *OTV* (Orange TV), created in 2007 as the first Lebanese publicly-traded company by the current President of the Lebanese Republic, Fpm leader Michel Aoun. A minor TV station is *Télé-Lumière* (TV of Light), a religious educationally-based station launched in 1991 and owned by the Maronite Church.

The political patronage and affiliation emerged clearly during the anti-government protest started in October 2019, as the various news channels treated and covered the events in different ways. TV stations like *LBCI*, *MTV* and *Al-Jadid* extensively covered the ongoing protests from different areas of the country, showing an overall support to the demand of the protestors.

Other stations like *OTV*, affiliated to the President Michel Aoun, *Al-Manar* and *Al-Akhbar*, affiliated to Hezbollah, supported the government and often downplayed, contrasted or simply ignored what was happening in Lebanese streets.

Digital Media

With regard to Internet services, there are currently more than 5.5 million Internet Users in Lebanon in 2019, 81.3 percent of the country population.

Through the *Ogero* company, the telecommunications ministry provides wireless Internet and DSL. DSL was offered for the first time in April 2007. According to recent Telecommunication Ministry figures, in few years the number of DSL subscribers has strongly increased, passing from around 18,000 in 2009 to 537,135 in 2016. Available in the main cities, the network is still under development in some rural areas. DSL services typically cost from €12 a month (2 Mbps) to €50 a month (above 8 Mbps), while wireless Internet services, offered for the first time in 2006, cost around €25 a month.

According to the [Broadband Manifesto](#) (May 2008), the economic growth and the social development of the country depend also on the availability of real broadband connectivity for citizens and enterprises. Despite the pressure from civil society groups, Lebanon still lacks infrastructures permitting access to a broadband connection. The country does not have a special network to transport data, which is presently being transported over the existing landline telephone network. Moreover, the international bandwidth is very low and limited, and the Telecommunications Ministry has exclusivity in establishing international gateways and transporting international traffic. There is no true competition in the Lebanese telecom market as *Ogero* dominates the market in a stagnant status quo environment.

In 2014, the ministry of Telecommunications launched the Digital Telecommunications Vision 2020 (DTV2020): divided in two phases, the plan aimed to reach the isolated areas of Lebanon with XDSL and to improve the existing network upgrading it to the fiber-optic network through the FTTC/H, and VDSL2+ technologies. The improvements would include the expansion of the 4.5G network in more than 50 locations across the country. The plan, with an estimated cost of 750 million dollars, is supervised and implemented by *Ogero*. However, it still did not meet the expected results and the year of completion has been postponed to 2022. Nevertheless, the penetration of Internet connection and the number of Internet users have increased compared to the previous years.

Another ambitious project was launched in 2019 by the same ministry, foreseeing the installation of a third submarine cable to connect Lebanon to Europe and increase its internet services capacity. The plan would lead Lebanon to become a hub of internet distribution for the whole region, however, a year after, it has not been implemented yet.

Thanks to digitisation, Lebanon's residents have access to a variety of news platforms, from 24-hour cable and satellite channels to Internet sites and text message services. But this wide range of available media outlets does not translate into a greater plurality of opinions. Many new sources simply replicate the voices expressed through traditional media. The same political agendas reflected in traditional media also exist online. Even the new players, previously marginalised for political reasons and now entering the media arena, simply imitate the established and partisan status quo. Journalists interviewed by Open Society for the 2012 Mapping Digital Media report evince a distrust for the uncontrolled quality of online material and suggest that digital media outlets, which support citizen journalism, actually exacerbate partisan bias.

According to the Arab Media Outlook 2009–2013 report, the top news websites in Lebanon belong to, or mirror, the same political parties that own the country's traditional media. Regarding online media, the same study noted that 23 percent of Lebanese people read news online more than five times a week, whilst 40 percent do so between one and four times a week, and 37 percent four times a month or less. Among the most popular websites there are mainly locally created news:

Lbcgroup.tv, *Aljazeera.tv*, the websites of the namesake TV channels, *Lebanon24*, a TV station based in Tripoli, in the North

of the country, and *Tayyar.org*, mouthpiece of the FPM and close to the pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian government sphere. In particular, according to the Effective Measure report based upon data collected from 11,937 individuals who were active online in Lebanon during September 2016, *Lbcgroup.tv* showed the largest audience in Lebanon, with almost 1.2m unique browsers visiting the site during the month. *Lebanon24* and *Tayyar.org* ranked second and third. Of the top 20 sites, *Lebanonfiles* and *Sayidaty* registered the longest average visit durations, with visitors to both sites staying for an average of 13 minutes and over.

In 2012 the magazine *Forbes Middle East* released the top-50 list of online newspapers in the MENA region, based on their “presence online, their content and the number of followers they generate.” Three Lebanese newspapers were included in the first 20 websites (*Al-Akhbar* at number 12; *An-Nahar* at 13 and *As-Safir* at 17). A more recent analysis conducted in 2020 by Industry Arabic, considers among the 20 most influential newspapers two Lebanese outlets: *The Daily Star* holds the third place and *An-Nahar* the seventh.

Even though it is not always a reliable source of information, the two main mobile operators (Alfa and Mtc) and many media outlets offer a breaking-news service via text messages. This service is valid in Lebanon and abroad and usually available for a \$10 fee a month. In more recent times, the websites of the major newspapers and TV stations (also pan-Arab satellite channels) have all started developing their own app for Android and iOS to promote their contents and send alerts for breaking news to mobile phones and other devices. Web television and video news are still scarcely used on Internet newspapers. The dominating source of web TV is Youtube and the various social network platforms such as Facebook and Instagram

The protests started in October 2019 bolstered both the creation of new channels of information and the change of style and contents of several existing ones. The immediate reaction was the emergence of several independent channels (mostly on Facebook and Instagram) that gathered information and provided visual reporting of what was occurring throughout the country. Some of them created structured networks as *Daleel Thawra*, that together with the social accounts has a website in which it aims to be “The directory of all initiatives & resources providing support, food, and donations for Lebanon’s revolution”. In the website it is possible to access to all the material, events, news and logistics of the ongoing protests. Several others like *Megaphone News*, *ThawraTV* and *Lebanon Uprising*, are ad hoc created channels that follow and provide information about the protests. On the other hand, many of the already existing blogs and influencers, started to closely participate to the protests providing insights and galvanizing the popular participation. It’s the case of *The961*, *Gino’s Blog* and several others. Their participation can be considered a further legitimization of the protest movement shaking the country by the end of 2019.

Social Networks

With the birth and rise of social media, Lebanese people have quickly used new technologies to connect, communicate and share information with each other. Over the past years, a slight dip in the demographic trend has been observed, as users over the age of 30 have steadily uptaken social media usage.

Facebook and Whatsapp are the most used social media channels in Lebanon, followed by Twitter and Instagram. According to data from the Internet World Stats, with 3.96 million Facebook subscribers (Dec 2019), Facebook penetration in Lebanon reaches the 58% (+8% compared to 2016), a rate that indicates a continuous growth and a pervasive use of this social network in the society. The Arab Social Media Report (ASMR 2017) reveals that English is the dominant language on Facebook, with the largest percentage of Facebook posts from Lebanese accounts written in English (65 percent, 33 percent in Arabic and less than 10 percent in French).

Being connectivity the main reason for people to use social media in the first place, it comes as no surprise that Twitter is by far less popular than Facebook, and Lebanon is no exception. The penetration of Twitter in Lebanon is slightly below 3 percent – as the statistics provided by the aforementioned ASMR demonstrate – with a total number of active users in Lebanon of 250,000 people as of March 2016. As officially defined by Twitter, an “active user” is someone who logs in (but does not necessarily tweets) once a month. As with Facebook, Lebanon is the most gender-balanced country in the Arab world. Even if the number of total users slightly increased, the estimated number of tweets produced diminished: 15,7m tweets in March 2016 compared to 18m in March 2014.

Instagram has reached an increasing penetration of 23% among the Lebanese population, with a total 1.6 million users in 2020, compared to 1.3 million users in 2017. Almost all of the media outlets created an official Instagram accounts to increase their audience and to broadcast more visually pleasant content.

Opinion Makers

Some emerging voices – often not aligned with any political group – have recently created a space with blogs and online social networking tools forming a growing community of online activists. These people might exert some influence in the socio-political and cultural realms, especially among the youngest generations, but they still have to compete with the power of traditional media.

At the same time, social activism has benefited from digitisation. As the report entitled Mapping Digital Media by Open Society points out, the first draft of a comprehensive animal rights law, the banning of the honour crime code from the law, the protection of 170 historic buildings slated for demolition and greater media coverage of issues concerning migrant/domestic workers were all achieved through digital activism. These organisations’ official websites and Facebook pages and groups are the most commonly used digital tools, and have the greatest impact.

Despite a number of disadvantages (i.e. poor Internet speed, lack of specific regulations, censorship and scarce government support) activists broadly agree that overall digitisation has positively affected their online activities and their impact.

According to the website Feedspot, which ranks blogs using several parameters, including Alexa Web Traffic Rank, the top ten Lebanese blogs in May 2020 were: *The961*, *BlogBaladi*, *Lebanese Recipes*, *Executive Magazine*, *Patricia Issa Lifestyle Blog*, *BelleBeirut*, *A Separate State of Mind*, *Gino’s Blog*, *Plus961*, *Newsroom Nomad*. This list reveals a dominance of blogs about current events, lifestyle and food. Considering the increased access to Internet and mobile connection among the Lebanese population, the penetration of blogs became more efficient through the use of social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram. In many cases, thanks to the extensive presence on several platforms and the increasing number of followers, a blog’s owner eventually becomes an influencer on the main treated topics.

In comparison to the past, there has been a proliferation of influencers covering several areas of interest (politics, culture, lifestyle, economy, etc.) with different references and points of view. Comparing different sources, the list of the most relevant influencers would change accordingly to the parameters and the topics taken into consideration, showing that there is not an overall prevalence of a single influencer.

In 2020, the ten most followed Twitter accounts in Lebanon belong mostly to singers or to stars of the entertainment world. The first, *Elissa*, enjoys more than 14m followers, reaching a wide audience way beyond the national borders. In the past years, also journalists like Rima Makatabi, an award winning and TV presenter at *Al-Arabiyya TV*. The shift might suggest a change within the public that could derive from an alteration of digital demographic distribution or from a change of general interests. Other important personalities that are particularly followed from the media sector are mainly TV political talk show

hosts such as Marcel Ghanem (LBC) and Imad Marmal (*Al-Manar*), as well as Ghassan Ben Jiddo, the director of *Al-Mayadin*, and Gisèle Khoury (former *LBC* and *Al-Arabiya*, now BBC Arabic). Among influent opinion makers there are newspapers columnists, such as Ghassan Charbil and Jihad Khazen from the pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat*; Michel Hajj Georgeou, writing for the French speaking *L'Orient-Le Jour*; Ibrahim al Amin, co-founder and editor in chief of *Al-Akhbar*.

The top ten most followed Instagram accounts in Lebanon reflect consistently the list of Twitter accounts. Beside celebrities, the majority of influencers' accounts covers lifestyle, food and fashion. Photography, arts and nature are trend topics as well: one of the most prominent influencers in Lebanon, according to Right Service for Digital Marketing is Abbas Sibai, president and co-founder of *LiveLoveBeirut*. The project, launched in 2012, is part of an international network aimed to implement community building projects taking into consideration the environmental, social and cultural features.

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Opinion makers

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- [Gino's Blog](#)
- [Plus961](#)
- [Newsroom Nomad](#)

Organisations

Trade Unions

As of today, Lebanon still lacks an association of journalists to protect and guarantee the rights of the people who cover the many varied roles associated with the news world. In an expression of the lively activism of the early modern Levantine press that had come into being in Beirut in the second half of the 20th century, dozens of reporters and local newspaper owners gathered in 1911 at the Grand Hotel Bassoul on the city's sea-front to give birth to the "Journalists Commission" (*al-Lajna as-sahafiyya*), the first institution created to regulate relations among journalists, publishers and political authorities. After almost a century, Lebanese journalists maintain the fervour of their ancestors but still complain about the absence of official bodies to protect their rights and denounce violations. In this respect, the "Samir Kassir Foundation for the defence of media and cultural freedoms in the Arab World" (*SKeyes*, see below) is *de facto* the only organisation in Lebanon to criticize and repeatedly denounce the Press syndicates' failure to effectively support the journalists. Over the last years, *SKeyes* has become increasingly more effective in reporting violations against journalists and press workers and in its awareness campaigns for freedom of press.

The 1962 Press Law formally organised journalists into two syndicates: the Lebanese Press Syndicate (*LPS*, *Niqabat as-sahafa al-lubnaniyya*, owners) and the Lebanese Press Editors Syndicate (*LPES*, *Niqabat muharriri as-sahafa al-lubnaniyya*, editors and reporters). A Higher Press Council was also created, along with other committees, to consider other issues pertinent to journalists, including the task of devising a retirement plan.

As established in its charter, the Press Editors Syndicate formally performs the functions of both a trade union protecting the interests of its members and an accountability body monitoring the conduct of journalists as well as providing guarantees for their professionalism and ethics. However, many reporters interviewed in Beirut in 2009 stated on condition of anonymity that both the Press and the Press Editors syndicates have for decades been two ineffectual institutions created merely in order to give the impression that Lebanon respects international press organisation standards. Around 75 percent of Lebanese journalists accredited by the Information Ministry do not appear as *LPES* members. The latter actually performs neither the function of a trade union nor that of an accountability institution. Moreover, in Beirut, officials of neither the *LPS* nor the *LPES*,

when contacted were able to clearly describe the nature and the function of the Higher Press Council.

According to local observers, there is no doubt that today the two bodies continue to be dominated by the political and sectarian carve-up, with a Maronite heading the *LPES* and a Sunni as *LPS*'s chief. In 2012, Aouni al-Kaaki, owner and editor-in-chief of daily *ash-Sharq* newspaper, was voted *LPS* president, succeeding Mohammad Baalbaki who had served in the post for over three decades; and In 2017 the Press Editors Syndicate re-elected Elias Aoun.

These organisations have proved to be weak and ineffective in their actions: the Press Syndicate must take decisions jointly with the owners' syndicate. As the employees usually have conflicting interests with their employers, collective action is paralysed. Moreover, both the syndicates are usually led by constantly re-elected octogenarians clinging to power and derisively referred to by detractors as "Jurassic Park". This system benefits only a handful of their executives and some faithful members.

In the past years, when along with *LBC* and *MTV*, the *An-Nahar* newspaper announced the dismissal of a total of more than 150 employees, the *LPES* took almost a week to issue a weak statement to "express solidarity with the colleagues" without taking any firm and effective position against these measures.

Given the financial crisis newsrooms are now facing, a lot of workers of the media sector have been unpaid for long time. Many of them have remained silent and searched for other jobs to do at the same time, also because the Lebanese legal system offers few chances for journalists to fight for their rights. When asked if they had gone on strike, the majority said they had not. Another possibility for unpaid staff is to ask for mediation at the Ministry of Labour. The minister then summons the two parties to find common ground on the matter. Several journalists from *Al-Mustaqbal* and *An-Nahar* have begun such procedures. If mediation fails, journalists can sue their employers in court, but this procedure is obviously costly and it might take years to reach a final verdict. As a witness recalls, a small group of journalists once attempted to strike and block the broadcast of a programme on *Future News*. After a meeting with the management, to which only the editors were invited, the strike attempt was aborted without explanation.

The situation worsened with the economic and financial regression that Lebanon is witnessing since several years. Media outlets, usually relying on the financial aid of political affiliation and patronage, were hit by shortages in funds, hindering their capacity and mostly damaging the employees, who in many cases had to cope without receiving their wages.

Journalist Associations

In the last decade, some independent associations were created in Lebanon to fill the vacuum left by the absence of effective trade associations and accountability institutions.

The *Samir Kassir Foundation* (named after the Lebanese journalist and historian killed in Beirut in 2005) in November 2007 created its 'armed wing' *SKeyes* not only to support the new generation of reporters but also to monitor violations against press freedom in Lebanon and the Arab world. *Samir Kassir Eyes* is based in Beirut and has regional correspondents – some of them undercover – in Jordan, Syria, the Palestinian Occupied Territories and Israel. Its aims are to defend freedom in academic and scientific research, to act within the framework of civil society forces for defending freedoms while respecting the law and to build a media and cultural lobby at Arab and international levels.

The *SKeyes* centre was established through a grant from the Foundation for the Future, an international organisation based in Amman (Jordan), whose work is dedicated to freedom of expression. *SKeyes* has mainly financial support from the European Union. The *SKeyes* centre periodically organises workshops, exhibitions and conferences on specific issues, prepares regular reports and protest petitions by journalists and intellectuals, participates in organising awareness

campaigns, offers its legal staff to help journalists and intellectuals subjected to prosecution, lawsuits and prison, and liaises with local and international committees that defend journalism, culture and human rights. Moreover, *SKeyes* cooperates with *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)* and launched the Media Ownership Monitor in Lebanon, with the aim of providing more transparency on the activities and the interests on the stakeholders owning and directing the media. The tool has a comprehensive scope and allows to retrieve many useful information about the media sector and contextualize better the different actors within the media landscape. *SKeyes* runs another project called “Press and Cultural Violations in the Levant”, producing a monthly report in which they list and contextualise the violations occurred in the region. Recently, during the anti-government protests and the Covid-19 pandemics, they released several reports both on abuses on journalists and media operators and guidelines on how safely continue the journalistic activities and on how to contrast the misinformation on the topic.

One of the most active independent associations is the *Maharat Foundation*, a group of journalists who have worked together and personally experienced the obstacles to free journalism in Lebanon. Their aims are among other things to develop media skills and limit the effect of self- and government-imposed censorship on media. The *Maharat Foundation* as well attempts to advocate for freedom of expression rights and focused lately on the monitoring of the uprisings, denouncing the cases of violation, brutality and advocating for more transparency.

In 1993 another “group of young journalists”, trained in the media departments of the Beirut universities, formed the *Club de la Presse (Nadi as-Sahafa)*, a non-for-profit organisation with the ambition to become a “free journalistic pulpit”. In 2006 thanks to several private donations from Lebanese and Arab businessmen, the *Club de la Presse* opened its prestigious headquarters in one of the newly restored buildings in central Beirut, where it regularly organises workshops, press conferences, book presentations and training courses with the declared aim of “helping young journalists find employment and overcome the difficulties of the Lebanese media system”. In recent years the *Club de la Presse* has gradually lost its role of reference point for local and foreign journalists. It ceased to be a supporting entity for journalists and limited its activities mostly to the formal hosting of press conferences.

News Agencies

The main Lebanese news agency is the state-owned *National News Agency*. Founded in 1961 and now located in the Ministry of Information building in central Hamra Street, the *Nna* has dozens of reporters in Beirut and other regions, from the northern borders with Syria to the southern Blue Line of demarcation with Israel, from the Mediterranean coast to the eastern fields of the Beqaa Valley. In the last years, its Arabic website has improved in terms of accessibility and frequency of update of the news, whilst its French and English versions are not updated with the same pace of the Arabic page. After few days since the outbreak of the protest in October 2019, the *NNA* Director-General Laure Sleiman was fired after having held her position for 11 years. Sleiman, allegedly fired for having decided to cover the protests, was replaced by Ziad Harfouche, sub-editor at *An-Nahar* newspaper and affiliated to the Free Patriotic Movement, President Michel Aoun’s party. The decision, adopted by the former minister of Information Jamal Jarrah, hit the public opinion by surprise, as Mrs. Sleiman had a brilliant career and was a respected journalist, winner of international awards and advocate for women empowerment and inclusion in Lebanon. The episode occurred a couple of weeks before the resignation of the Hariri government, and it is another demonstration of the constant involvement of political factions within the media. The replacement of Laure Sleimani with a supporter of the government, shows a precise intention of safeguarding the élite’s interests and assuring a control over the broadcast information.

Another local news service is the private and more modest *Central News Agency* (Wikalat al-anba' al-markaziyya), better known as *Al-Markaziyya*. Created in 1983 and directed by the Pierre Abi Aql, it has the ambition to compete with the *Nha* in the local market, but does not seem to have the same penetration in the Lebanese territories.

On the other hand, political, economic, social and cultural features published by the Arabic services of *Reuters*, *Agence France Presse* (AFP), *Associated Presse* (AP), *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* (DPA) and the Spanish news agency *EFE* usually find considerable space in Lebanese media outlets, as do their “bulletins” (breaking news), which are often quoted by the local TVs, radios and news web sites.

Audience measurement organisations

Neither on the official website of the Lebanese Ministry of Information, nor on the page of the Ministry of Telecommunications it is possible to find available data on radio and TV audience.

Since 1999, IPSOS, an international leading media measurement company, has been providing complete Television Audience Measurement (TAM) data to the Lebanese market. IPSOS has the almost absolute monopoly on statistics on audience measurement in the country, a monopoly only partially broken in 2012 by the German market research company GfK Media Research. Being IPSOS funded primarily by LBCI (the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation), there is a clear conflict of interest in this matter. In fact, in October 2014, five television stations (MTV, Future TV, NBN, al-Jadid and Télé-Liban) decided to withdraw from IPSOS surveys, tired of its “inaccurate ratings” and of what they described as the company’s “opaque” measures and relationships with LBCI. The latest report produced by IPSOS on the Lebanese TV Audience Measurements dates back to 2016 with key findings highlighting the growing penetration among the country and the time spent by the users, compared to the previous years. No other reports are available after 2016.

In addition to this, the provision of TAM meters throughout the entire country cannot take into account demographic changes, due to the scarcity of national statistics on population and its distribution (the last official census in Lebanon was conducted in 1932). As a direct consequence, representative audience samples can hardly be obtained. As media expert Sara El-Richani points out, the unreliability of the figures on audience depends also on the limited number of TAM meters in the country. In fact, these devices, primarily for security reasons, are absent from densely populated area, such as Hezbollah strongholds in the Southern suburbs of Beirut or in the South of Lebanon, or the Palestinian camps.

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- [National News Agency](#) (NNA)
- [Reuters in Arabic](#)

Audience measurement organisations

- [IPSOS](#)

Policies

Media legislation

Lebanese media are formally organised under the 1962 Press Law and the 1994 Audiovisual Media Law, but in many aspects rules are respected only on paper. The 1962 Law was officially enacted in order to “protect the press from random abusive interventions” and to shield the State and its citizens from biased campaigns in the press. The law defines a journalist as being at least 21 years of age, having a baccalaureate degree and having apprenticed for at least four years. Practicing journalists do not require certification, although those with a degree in journalism must register with the *LPES*, whilst it is the Ministry of Information that issues annual press cards.

As is the case for other Arab states’ press laws, the Lebanese text states vaguely that “nothing may be published that endangers national security [...] national unity [...] or that insults high-ranking Lebanese officials [...] or a foreign head of State”. It is difficult not to perceive a subtle warning to reporters behind these loaded and ambiguous expressions. In the recent past, several episodes have focused attention on the concrete danger posed by these controversial articles in the Law.

According to the 1962 Press Law, in order to own a newspaper, both the owner and all stockholders of a joint-stock company must be Lebanese citizens. However, in practice the law is often dodged by foreigners who buy stocks under Lebanese names. As a result, a number of Lebanese newspapers depend on foreign funding.

The 1994 Audiovisual Media Law separated TV and radio stations into two categories: those licensed for broadcasting news and political coverage and those focusing only on entertainment or general interest content. As mentioned before, the new rule on the one hand abolished the State broadcasting monopoly; whilst, on the other hand, it forced dozens of TVs and radio stations to close, thus favouring the emergence of a few powerful local and regional tycoons at the expense of pluralism and freedom of expression.

Flagrant contradictions in the country’s media laws and regulations have been periodically reported, revealing the lack of an effective framework to regulate media work and the legal rights of media workers. Not only laws governing media in Lebanon are outdated, but also they can be found in the penal code, the Elections Law, the Press Law, the Military Justice Code, and the Audiovisual Media Law, creating a logistical nightmare of overlapping jurisdictions. The digitisation and new digital media also necessitate the establishment of new laws and regulations. Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau was founded in Lebanon in 2006. It is part of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) with the aim to manage and monitor the internet contrasting cybercrime, like child pornography, thefts, scams, frauds, etc.

In 2010, Mr Tariq Mitri, who was then minister of information, launched a series of consultations with journalists, media

owners, advocacy groups, and politicians to identify priorities and guidelines for a new comprehensive legal framework. The heated debate that was taking place got stopped when the unity government collapsed in January 2011, and then stalled by the ensued political paralysis.

A 2013 Ministry of Telecommunication [report](#) (the minister in charge was then Nicolas Sehnaoui) stated that a new media law, “essential to the development of the sector”, was still awaiting approval by the parliament. The draft included several key amendments to comprise digital television and various broadcast formats (Internet Protocol Television and Mobile TV). The report, however, did not mention any substantial overhaul to control the many flaws of the current legal frame.

A law regulating e-commerce and data protection in Lebanon was approved only in late 2018, consistently late if considered the world’s average. The Law No. 81/2018 updates the 2004 law that was regulating the field. The law introduces the recognition of electronic documents as evidence and facilitates the expansion of the online commerce sector. However, it presents consistent flaws regarding data and consumers protection. According to SMEX, there is no reflection of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), failing to provide standards of protections shared by many other countries. In this case as well, the overlap of different ministries’ authority makes the provisions unclear and of difficult application, resulting in dangerous and unsafe conditions for users’ privacy and protection.

Accountability systems

Censorship and Self-Censorship

Lebanon’s media environment is known to be one the freest in the Arab Near Est. However, the country is plagued by a confessional government system, with most of the leaders supported by foreign countries, which inevitably influences media. Digitisation has not affected the business model Lebanese media rely on and that is fostered by partisan and foreign financial support. Most of the country’s news outlets support and represent public personalities and/or a political party with little room for independent and marginalised voices, or for diversity. And the vast majority of these outlets are owned, managed, or financed by local or regional powers. News media all too often become propagandists for their patrons. Publishers are often politicians themselves linked to religious sects. They exert indirect and direct pressure on journalists. In some cases, reporters transform into political activists who reproduce a narrative, censoring and exaggerating it, without caring about professional ethics.

In 1967, censorship on foreign publications was abolished and three years later the government decided to withdraw censors from TV stations. But formally the *Sûreté Générale* (General Security) still maintains power to control and censor the press and media. Between 2008 and 2009 Tariq Mitri, who was then the Information minister, repeatedly expressed his willingness to abolish any form of censorship and on this point he has presented a draft law in Parliament that is still being debated in parliamentary committees. However, it is not difficult to imagine that reporters in fact practise self-censorship so as not to be subjected to various kinds of pressure and in order to protect themselves and their relatives both physically and psychologically.

Nevertheless, in 2020, Lebanon was ranked 102nd in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, second among Arab States (after Tunisia, 72nd). However, if compared with previous years’ ranking, Lebanon has increasingly worsened its position, as it was 61st in 2009, 93rd in 2011 and 98th in 2016.

In this period, the government has targeted social media activists and bloggers to reduce online criticism and track down those responsible of it: Low-profile police arrests, interrogations, and intimidations have not been rare in the new media sphere. In June-July 2010, the public prosecutor accused three citizens of defaming President Michel Suleiman on their blogs and Facebook. In the same period, a local blogger was interrogated by military intelligence for posts critical of the armed

forces and the president.

The Lebanese jurisprudence considers the Internet as one of the means of publication, meaning that any shared content or expressed opinion is under the responsibility of the user. The absence of a precise regulation on the matter, created to an ambiguous situation regarding censorship, where the penal code's provisions apply to the internet, especially regarding slander and libel crimes, concerning offense or defamation of mostly political and religious entities and figures. The prosecution of the mentioned crimes is under the Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau, which has the power issue legal notices and arrest warrants. Nevertheless, the main entity in charge for the official Media censorship is the General Security, which has the power of approve or dismiss of any audio-visual content in Lebanon. The first reasons of censorship concern political and religious matters (60% according to *MARCH* reports), other contents related to homosexuality and Israel are strongly censored as well.

As the report entitled Mapping Digital Media by Open Society points out, extra-legal methods have been used to identify people behind anonymous online content, but such episodes are mostly low-profile and little known, partly because they are often not reported due to intimidations and threats.

The debate around press freedom ignited again during the protests started in October 2019. Since the outbreak, an increasing number of journalists and media operators were reportedly harassed and eventually brutalized, not only by the security forces but also from the protesters. However, the received threats are not only physical, but concerns disrespect of individual privacy and arbitrary detention.

Regulatory authorities

The regulations governing the press in the current time have been sharply criticised for promoting a highly conservative conception of journalism, based on a corporatist approach and treating the press as a distinct and insular profession rather than as a general activity that any person may engage in. After the promulgation of the 1994 Media Law, the National Council for Audiovisual Media (*al-Majlis al-watani li-l'lam al-mar'y w-al-masmu*) was created in order to monitor respect of the 1994 Law. But the council continues to be an ineffective institution and its reports of violations perpetrated by politicians, parties and intelligence services against the press go unheeded. Moreover, it is clear that its members are chosen mainly along sectarian lines, as is always the case for Lebanese institutions.

Suspension of the press and confiscation of journalists' press cards can occur in case of breach of professional ethic, disrespect for national sovereignty, spread of false or confidential information, defamation of heads of states, threat to national integrity and security. In Lebanon, public prosecutors do not possess the power to close any media outlet. They are only entitled to seize the controversial publications and then refer the matter to the competent authorities. This being the general procedure, the minister of information can close any television channel.

The application of these laws has been all too often politically motivated and characterised by arbitrariness. A famous case was the coerced closure in 2002 of MTV channel and *Mount Lebanon* radio station, owned by Gabriel Murr, which resumed broadcasting only in 2009. The publication court accused the stations of violating the law that prohibits airing on behalf of candidates during elections, but, since also other Lebanese channels did not comply with the elections law, some observers suspected that the closure was due to MTV's criticism of the Lebanese government and of Syria.

In 2010, the aforementioned Maharat Foundation, together with MP Ghassan Moukhybar proposed a draft media law ("Maharat Bill") to modernise the legislation of the media sector. The bill proposes to abolish prison sentences for speech offences committed by journalists (a right to which only journalists registered in the Editors Syndicate are currently entitled) when communicating their opinion, whether on a print media outlet or online. Moreover, it puts the cancellation of the

licensing for newspapers, the Press Union and all the requirements to practice journalism, forward for discussion. Furthermore, it aims to guarantee online freedom of expression without any interference from the government that is not allowed to block or filter online content or to impose any licensing for online media. Ten years later, the *Maharat Bill* is still under consideration by the information and communication parliamentary committee..

The new digital media environment also necessitates the establishment of new laws and regulations for media and telecommunications. There is currently a great deal of confusion as to which legal framework is applicable to online media outlets, because the Publication Law and the Audiovisual Media Law respectively regulate print and audiovisual broadcasting and are not easily transposed to digital media. Nonetheless, the legislation designed for traditional media has partly been applied to the digital media, and special laws and regulations for the Internet, mobile telephony, and other digital media have yet to be established. In June 2010, a number of groups of the civil society successfully delayed a vote in the Lebanese parliament on a draft for a “New Information Technology Law”. This draft contained a large amount of restrictive measures of the online freedom of expression and would have severely affected privacy rights of citizens and corporations, as well as reduced journalistic freedom in the digital sphere.

In the same year, the Ministry of Information launched consultations with media owners, journalists, advocacy groups and politicians to identify parameters for a new comprehensive legal framework in order to improve the current situation.

The laws and regulations that have been proposed so far, mainly serve the interests of the operators and businessmen and do not try to put a limit to the power of the dominant politicians and sectarian groups. The digital media are in fact firmly in the hands of the same dominant political sectarian groups that control also the traditional media.

The licensing of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and the operation of mobile phone services are allocated to the dominant political powers that already control the broadcast license.

Sources

Laws, regulations and institutions

- [Arabic textes of 1962 and 1994 Media laws](#)
- [Internet Legislation Atlas](#)
- [Law 81/2018](#)
- [Maharat Foundation](#)
- [Media Law](#)
- [Ministry of Telecommunication](#)
- [Reporters Without Borders on Lebanon](#)
- [Virtual Museum of Censorship](#)

Education

Universities and schools

In recent years, Lebanese universities have expanded and developed their focus on contemporary global issues and their

attention to new technologies. Almost all the major universities in the country offer a programme of study for a degree in Journalism. All these programmes try to balance between theoretical and practical courses, so to be in line with all the developments in the fields of communication.

In the early 1990s journalism programmes were set up at the main academic institutions. The public Lebanese University and the four main private universities of the country (American University of Beirut - *AUB*, Université Saint-Joseph - *USJ*, Lebanese American University - *LAU*, Notre Dame University - *NDU*) started to offer degrees in journalism, including postgraduate studies, even though the nature of the syllabuses differed somewhat. The total study period is five to six years (three to four years for a BA and one to two years for an MA programme).

The public Lebanese University has the longest tradition in journalism education; a number of working editors and publishers have graduated from this institute, which now has an information and documentation centre and offers a French-language degree course, which combines theory and practical study.

The Journalism Training Program (*JTP*) at *AUB* is a programme for working professionals and not for university students, providing training in investigative journalism, elections coverage and newsroom management, with courses in Arabic, English and French, whilst the Maronite *NDU* offers a three-year course in English. In addition to this programme, *AUB* hosts a Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies where students can delve into a more academic-oriented path to better understand the Arab media environment from a theoretical point of view.

Rather than a BA in Journalism, the *LAU* has one in Communication Arts. The degree offers three areas of emphasis, one of which is journalism, often described as “the poor orphan” of the trio. The other two areas are drama and Radio/TV/Film combined. At the same time, *LAU* is home to the Institute for Media Training and Research (IMTR). Created in 2007 as the result of the merging of the Institute for Media Arts (BIMA) and the Institute for Professional Journalist (IPJ), the IMTR aims to help reporters, editors and managers improve their operational skills in the new media techniques. It also focuses on issues in media law, ethics and freedom of the press in the Lebanese and Arab contexts. Further education and training for practising journalists are rare. Media groups that have the resources provide occasional internships. The *USJ* provides within the department of Human Sciences a BA, MA and PhD careers in Information and Communication, preparing to different professions within the media sector, mostly focusing on journalism and communication in its audio-visual declinations.

More recently, also other universities started programmes aimed to prepare students to media professions. The Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, a private Catholic university, for example, has introduced both an undergraduate and a graduate curriculum within the department of Journalism and Communication in the Faculty of Letters; the school of Arts and sciences at the Lebanese International University also offers a BA programme of study for the journalism major; the University of Balamand, has a relatively new and more generic programme in Mass Communication with three different curricula (Radio/TV Performance and Production, Journalism and News Management, Marketing Communication).

Professional development

Young graduates from a journalism programme have no preferential path to make their way as professionals. Firstly, they have to do an internship in a media outlet, which is usually unpaid. Then, to succeed in the profession, not only should they count on their talent, but also on family connections and community networks.

Media Development Organisations

A number of local and international organisations offer training programs in which journalists and news corporations participate. The Amman-based Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) was formed in early 2005 to promote

investigative journalism in Arab newsrooms and support independent, quality, professional journalism. It is a regional organisation that provides trainings and media coaching to journalists all over the Arab world. Besides this, it supports and oversees journalists and editors to conceive an idea, research, write, edit and publish or broadcast professional investigative journalism reports.

Thomson Foundation has currently five training projects for media and public communication practitioners in Lebanon to help them improve engagement with their audiences. The foundation leads also a consortium (that includes: Action Global, European Journalism Centre, Free Press Unlimited, France Médias Monde, Ipsos Mori and Particip) to implement the Project *OPEN Media Hub* funded by the European Union Programme OPEN Neighbourhood. To cope with the recent lockdown measures adopted by the Lebanese government to prevent the spread of the Covid-19, Thomson Foundation continued its activities of training and education through online webinars and meetings. Other platforms offer journalism courses and trainings online, mostly from private institutions.

The Lebanese May Chidiac Foundation, launched by the eponymous May Chidiac, is dedicated to training, research, and education aimed at graduates of media departments who require practical skills to find work opportunities. Its affiliated Media Institute aims to bridge the gap between academia and the media industry, providing students and professionals technical facilities and training programs in order to improve their competencies and competitiveness.

Founded in 2008, Social Media Exchange (SMEX) is a registered Lebanese NGO that conducts training, research and advocacy on strategic communications and human rights in the digital world. They organise training courses (online and offline) and learning events, they also produce and localise manuals, guides and researches on Internet policy and digital rights (in English and in Arabic), in partnership with other media development organisations and companies worldwide. With the financial support of the Netherlands-based development aid organisation Hivos, SMEX has conceptualised and led the creation of *Tasharuk* (Collaboration, in Arabic), a platform in three languages (English, Arabic and Persian) developed to provide citizen journalists with resources and materials on the use of digital and social technologies. SMEX is focused also advocated for clearer and more accountable reforms in the Media Law, attempting to highlight the controversies and the flaws of the existing regulations (the more recent adopted in 2018). It advocates as well for a more accountable role of the ministries and authorities in the media sector, most notably on the matters of political interference and of violation of expression and speech freedom.

Sources

Comprehensive and complete compilations of media statistics and prime sources for detailed information do not exist in Lebanon, but scattered news and few reports can be found on the Internet. These are published, for instance, by the aforementioned SKeyes, Maharat (Skills) Foundation and IPJ and include Media Unlimited, an English- and Arabic-language web platform founded by Magda Abu-Fadil, former director of the abovementioned Journalism Training Program at AUB.

Universities/Schools of Journalism

- [American University of Beirut](#)
- [Holy Spirit University of Kaslik](#)
- [IPJ at Lebanese American University](#)
- [Journalism Training Program at AUB](#)
- [Lebanese International University](#)
- [Magda Abu-Fadil](#) (Twitter)
- [Maharat \(Skills\) Foundation](#)

- [Media Unlimited](#)
- [Notre Dame University](#)
- [SKeyes](#)
- [Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth](#)
- [University of Balamand](#)
- [University of Lebanon](#)

Media development organisations

- [Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism](#)
- [May Chidiac Foundation \(Twitter\)](#)
- [May Chidiac Foundation](#)
- [Open Media Hub](#)
- [Social Media Exchange](#) (SMEX)
- [Tasharuk](#)
- [Thomson Foundation](#)

Telecommunications

Mobile network ecosystem

The telecommunication regulator in Lebanon is *al-Hay'a al-munazzima li-l-ittisalat* (Telecommunications Regulatory Authority - TRA), which was established in accordance with Law 431 of 2002 as an independent public institution designated to liberalise, regulate, and develop telecommunications in Lebanon.

According to this law, licenses to providers of mobile phone services are awarded by decree issued by the Council of Ministers, upon the proposal of the Minister, after conducting an international public auction, and according to specifications and conditions prepared by the TRA. Beyond issuing licenses and regulations, the TRA is also responsible for developing the sector, monitoring for any abuse of dominant market position and anti-competitive practices and taking remedial action when necessary. However, also in this field, the current situation provides ample evidence that this provision offers scarce protection to consumers. Through the two national mobile companies (see next paragraph), the government maintains a substantial monopoly in the sector, which results in a lack of competition in the market that has kept tariffs relatively high and delayed the expansion of network services to underserved areas, such as rural zones and large parts of the Biqa' valley.

According to a survey conducted by Jordan-based research and consulting firm Arab Advisors Group about the cellular market in the Arab world, Lebanon has the highest prepaid cellular package rate in the Arab world by May 2018. Lebanon detains the first position in the chart since several years, in comparison with the cell rates of 48 mobile phone operators across 19 Arab countries, ranked on the basis of their prevailing mobile rates, including applicable taxes.. In parallel, the survey indicates that the validity period of a prepaid recharge card in Lebanon is 30 days, the shortest among Arab countries. The two mobile phone companies operating in the country require prepaid cards to be recharged every 30 days, penalising users who miss the deadline by seizing their remaining credit and then deactivating their line, forcing them to buy a new one

In addition, the costs of internet packages and bundles to use Whatsapp, Facebook, etc. with mobile connection follow the same trend, resulting among the highest in the MENA region. The already heavy situation was worsened by the decision of

the Ministry of Telecommunication to introduce the so-called “Whatsapp-tax” by January 2020, a tax that would apply on the Voice over IP (VoIP) services, charging a daily fee of US\$0.20 for a maximum of US\$6 a month. The decision, taken during the deep economic crisis, faced the popular frustration and anger, igniting the protests that soon reached a national scale.

Company profiles

Lebanon has two mobile phone companies, Alfa and Touch. Both operators are owned and closely controlled by the supervisory board of TRA. Therefore, both of them share their entire data ware with governmental authorities upon their request. (Media outlets often report news of arrests of alleged criminals on the basis of such data).

However, day-to-day management is outsourced to two private companies, respectively Global Telecom Holdings and Zain. The first, former Orascom Telecom, is an international telecommunication company based in the Netherlands and operating mobile networks in various nations; the latter is a Kuwaiti company. However, both operators have an agreement with the government, which stipulates that all revenue go to the State, in exchange for a monthly fixed sum. This explains both the lack of investment from the mobile operators, since they will be paid a fixed amount regardless of the revenue or lack thereof, and the low level of competition in the sector, since the two companies split the market evenly between themselves (Touch is the leading mobile and data operator with a market share standing at 53 percent, according to the company’s website).

Main trends

Expansion of 3G and 4G coverage is helping drive the uptake of mobile broadband services, despite delays in service launches, slow rollouts and issues around affordability. Nowadays smartphones are the preferential point of access to the Internet for the majority of Arab users and phones have surpassed desktop or laptop computers in terms of time spent accessing the Internet daily in the Arab World (Salem, F. 2017).

According to the company App Annie specialising in app market data and insights, entertainment and social apps (both free and paid) dominate the top ten of the most downloaded apps from both Apple’s iOS app store and Google Play. Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram confirm their dominant positions. Games and puzzles also rank high, both paid and free. Besides these, it is worth mentioning that, according to App Annie data, among the top ten apps downloaded (both from the Apple’s iOS store and Google Play) during the month of September 2018 there is the Lebanese app Anghami. This is today the Arab world’s biggest home-grown music streaming service. Founded in 2012 by two Lebanese entrepreneurs, Eddy Maroun and Elie Habib, it provides Arabic and international music to stream and download for offline mode. Anghami music streaming has been used by more than 78m users by March 2019, 82% from MENA countries.

As far as mobile money is concerned, Lebanon has a sophisticated banking industry and the percentage of adults with an account at a financial institution is 45%, more than half of it belong to individuals of the richer strata of the Lebanese society, according to the 2017 World Bank’s Global Findex. The banks of the country have begun implementing mobile money, both mobile payments and mobile banking. Registered Syrian refugees have access to a mixed system of aid: e-cards and cash. Those who have e-cards cannot use mobile banking. According to the International Finance Corporation (IFC) 2012 report, the implementation of mobile money is being done by the banks on their own and in conjunction with Mobile payments suppliers within Lebanon.

However, according to the latest ArabNet report titled “Lebanese innovation economy for tech startups in 2018”, which highlights the main challenges local entrepreneurs are facing in the country, one of the main challenges facing startups in Lebanon is the lack of an e-government (89 percent of respondents), which ends up costing founders to physically do their paperwork. This is considered very time consuming and expensive. Moreover, the report reveals that trusting and usage of

online payment methods in Lebanon and the region are considered a top problem which burdens e-commerce based businesses. Most consumers are either reluctant, or unable, to conduct e-commerce activities, for the limited access that many have to bank accounts, and as a result, credit and debit cards.

Mobile coverage

The International Telecommunication Union provides data for mobile network coverage from 2012 to 2016. The average value for Lebanon during this time span was 97.86 percent, with 99.1 percent of inhabitants within range of a mobile signal. Based on ITU's The State of Broadband 2018 report, the number of mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants is 56.8 (2017 data).

In November 2011, 3G services were launched in the country and subsequently also 4G. According to the website OpenSignal's latest report (data referring to February 2018), today Lebanon's 4G users can expect to find a Long-Term Evolution (LTE) signal 74.48 percent of the time. When it comes to 4G speeds, this can depend on many factors: the spectrum devoted to LTE, whether new technologies have been adopted, the network density and congestion. Users connecting to LTE networks in Lebanon experience an average download connection speed of 25.96Mbps. In 2018 was conducted the first successful trial of 5G network within the framework of the "Digital Telecommunications Vision 2020". Both *Alfa* and *Touch* companies are moving steps forward the testing and installation of 5G in Lebanon. *Touch* was the first to successfully install the first live mobile 5G site providing low latency and a speed of 1.4Gb/s. Since November 2019, in the Rafic Hariri airport in Beirut a 5G network managed by Ogero is available to the passengers travelling through the facility.

'Arsal, a border town in northeast Lebanon, has been without mobile Internet from August 2014 to September 2017. According to former telecommunications minister Boutros Harb, contacted by Khalid Rifa'i, the president of a group of civil society organizations in 'Arsal, this was for "security" reasons. In the town, home to 160,000 residents, including both locals and Syrian refugees, 3G and 4G mobile Internet access was reportedly shut down after Islamist fighters captured and killed Lebanese soldiers. While OGERO continued to operate there, the installation and monthly fees to obtain fixed-line Internet services became exorbitant for the residents of 'Arsal, which has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. For this reason, the mobile Internet shutdown had effectively cut off the town. Though the Internet has since been restored, there is no law in place to prevent the government from ordering similar shutdowns, and the Telecommunications Law provides it with the authority to do so again.

In the context of the economic crisis, in early 2020 Lebanon faced the risk of not meeting the required amount of foreign currency needed to pay the international internet providers. However, the risk of a complete shutdown of internet services in the country did not occur yet.

It is noteworthy that during the protests started in 2019, the internet connection was not disabled or suspended, as occurred in other countries in the region facing similar situations. The overall speed of connection was however reduced, due to the concentration of people connected to the mobile network in the same time and place.

Mobile ownership

Based upon data published in October 2018 by the regular *Le Commerce du Levant 'Tableau de bord'*, over an official population of less than 4 million people plus almost one million Syrian refugees, there are 4,439,455 mobile users (increase of 3.23 percent, in comparison with October 2017). For the 3/4G mobile Internet, there are 3,274,476 users. There is no reliable updated data on possible geographical and economic divides among users. Though a prolonged and direct observation of the context suggests that there are not major divides among users, but rural and remote areas of the country

may have fewer users than other areas.

Lebanon is still considered a laggard country in terms of mobile diffusion, if compared to other Arab countries (only Iraq equals Lebanon with 81.19 percent of subscriptions in 2016). This is mainly due the already mentioned high cost of mobile telephony and to poor telecommunication infrastructure, especially in rural areas.

Overall, mobile phones are mainly use to communicate and use social networks, but also for news and entertainment (music, video, games, etc).

Sources

- [Alfa](#)
- [Anghami](#)
- [International Telecommunication Union](#) (ITU)
- [Law 431/2002](#)
- [OpenSignal](#)
- [Telecommunications Regulatory Authority](#) (TRA)
- [Touch](#)

Innovation

Landscape analysis

According to the *Lebanese Innovation Economy Tech Startups 2018 Report* by ArabNet, Lebanon displays an exceptionally high number of funds for such a small country, hosting 13 percent of the total number of investors in MENA. Over the past four years and in comparison to other MENA markets, Lebanon has steadily risen in the ranks in both number of deals (around 40 deals in 2016) and value of deals (around US\$56m in 2016).

In 1962, *al-Majlis al-watani li-l-buhuth al-'ilmiyya* (the National Council of Scientific Research - CNRS) was established with the aim to encourage scientific research. As there is no ministry dealing with national policy-making in science and technology, it is considered as the main umbrella organisation for science and the governmental advisor in this sector, defining the guidelines of the national science policy. According to the "Education Public Expenditure Review – Lebanon" published in 2017 by the World Bank, the Lebanese government allocated 2.1% of national GDP to education. The trend is slightly positive if compared to 2010 (1.8% of national GDP) but it is negative when compared to 2005 (2.4% of national GDP).

The CNRS works with affiliated research centres and cooperates with academic and other scientific institutions. It is also responsible for managing the Centre for Geophysics, the Centre for Marine Science, the Centre for Remote Sensing and the Lebanese Atomic Energy Commission. In 2006, the CNRS launched a new five-year Science, Technology and Innovation Policy. The policy was meant to enhance and diversify science, technology and innovation input in economic activities, through new funding mechanism, and was prepared in cooperation with UNESCO, ALECSO and ESCWA. However, efforts to implement the Science, Technology and Innovation Policy were slowed down due to the effects of military conflicts and subsequently economic and financial constraints. As a follow-up to the Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, in 2014 the CNRS instituted the Lebanese Observatory for Research, Development and Innovation, with support of ESCWA to

assess and monitor key indicators in research and development.

Besides this, Lebanon counts several NGOs active in science, including the Lebanese Association for the Advancement of Science (founded in 1968 to enhance knowledge and promote scientific research) and *al-Akadimiya al-'arabiyya li-l-'ulum* (Arab Academy of Sciences), established in 2002 to support and promote excellence in research by Arab scientists, and also to act as a consultative body on scientific issues related to the Arab world. In 2007, the Government recognised by decree the Lebanese Academy of Sciences, a learned society modelled after the French *Académie des sciences*.

In 2013, the Central Bank of Lebanon issued Circular 331 and initially aimed to provide a capital injection of over US\$400m into the Lebanese entrepreneurship ecosystem. This was introduced in a bid to halt the brain drain and boost local employment. Subsequently, in 2016, amendment 419 was introduced increasing the potential investment of the banks to up to US\$600m collectively in Lebanese tech startups. This amount represents 4 percent of the capital of Lebanese banks (ArabNet 2018). The influx of money has spurred the creation of new venture capital funds, which cover the various levels of funding, new accelerators, and new co-working spaces. Supporting the sector has also become a top priority at all levels of the Lebanese government. The Ministry of Telecom has taken a leadership role, launching in February 2018, MIC Ventures, a fund of US\$48m supported by Alfa and Touch. This seven-year fund aims at investing in local ICT and telecommunication startups to help them boost the Lebanese economy. In parallel, the Investment and Development Authority in Lebanon (IDAL) has launched its Business Support Unit (BSU) to provide startups with the required information, advice, and licensing support in order to start their companies in Lebanon. The sector has reported a growth of eight percent a year and aimed to create 25,000 jobs by 2025. By 2017, it had successfully created 9,000 jobs, and the central bank had approved investments of \$368m. In 2019, due to the economic and financial crisis, the trend has started to fall, and the numbers of ventures decreased by the 32% compared to 2017.

Greater Beirut is the main focus for digital users. Sidon, Tripoli and Tyre are the other main urban contexts where digital users are located. The main divides are rural/urban, centre/periphery. Not so much from a socio-economic point of view or a gender divide. However, the respondent profiles of a survey promoted by ArabNet, targeting owners of tech and digital startups with a working product or service based in Lebanon, reveal that the majority of the surveyed (sampled digital startup founders, co-founders, or partners) are male (82 percent) and almost half of all examined are in the more mature bracket of 31 years to 40 years of age (44 percent) suggesting that the environment is dominated by more experienced male entrepreneurs.

Profiles of main tech parks, accelerators, hackathons

In September 2012, the Beirut Digital District (BDD) was officially launched and in mid-2018 it was eventually opened. It is located in Bashura, an area geographically adjacent to Beirut's Central District, Lebanon's business hub. The BDD is a pioneer national initiative, aiming at creating a tech-hub for the digital industry in Lebanon and the region. It was conceived to attract foreign digital endeavours and boost opportunities for local entrepreneurs. The project is a joint effort by the private and public sectors, established by the Ministry of Telecommunications and real estate developer ZRE and *Berytech*, a Lebanese incubator accelerator for the development of startups in the ICT field.

Berytech was initiated in 2002 by the Saint-Joseph University and designed to be the first technological pole in Lebanon to promote the creation and development of startups, focusing on innovation and technology. Its first premises were established next to the Faculty of Engineering of Saint-Joseph University to nurture high-tech companies and help them commercialise innovative ideas and technologies. It hosts dozens of companies in the IT sector. In addition, this site is the official host to the first Internet Exchange Point (IXP) in Lebanon allowing local Internet traffic from different Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to move through a local bandwidth, at faster speed and at a lower cost for the service providers.

After developing another centre to support startups and SMEs innovating the health sector, in 2013 *Berytech* initiated its third Business Development Centre, the Berytech Digital Park. The Digital Park is hosted in Beirut Digital District and was designed to host ICT startups and commercially established ICT companies. In 2019, Berytech launched the ACT Smart Innovation Hub aimed at strengthening business advancement, economic growth and job creation in the Agri-food and Cleantech sectors in Lebanon, with an expected duration of 36 months. However, due to the current situation of instability the works and projects have slowed down. Leading tech publisher *TechCrunch* has scheduled its first flagship startup competition for entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa in BDD in October 2018.

These types of hubs usually attract elite circles of urbanised young and middle-aged people with formal education, besides expats and foreigners, but also NGOs, INGOs, international organisations, embassies, etc.

Sources

- [Arab Academy of Science](#)
- [Beirut Digital District](#)
- [Berytech](#)
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- [Lebanese Academy of Sciences](#)
- [Lebanese Association for the Advancement of Science](#)

Traditional forms of communication

Summary

Before the Civil War, Lebanon is claimed to have been “slowly building a reputation as a cinema centre in the Arab world, rivalled only by Egypt. This privilege would end with the war, and Lebanese cinema was transformed from an industry to a collection of films made by disparate filmmakers working independently.” (Khatib, L. 2008) When the war began most of the Lebanese filmmakers started to make documentary films about it, but with the spread of violence, brain drain, lack of access to quality filming equipment, closure of studios and theatres, censorship and a decrease in funding had a heavy toll on the sector. With the formal end of the conflict, the early 1990s saw the creation of films that dealt with the subject of the Civil War, most of them funded by European countries. Later, subjects related to confrontation of social taboos started to appear. In the last decades, Lebanese cinema has become increasingly bigger and more structured.

A number of Lebanese filmmakers have succeeded in reaching popularity and appreciation among the international public and festivals, not only in the Arab World. Movies directed by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Ghassan Salhab, Georges Hachem, Ziad Doueiri and Nadine Labaki have been screened in theatres all around the world and competed in

major film festivals. Among the latest successes, Doueiri's *The Insult* was nominated at the 2017 Academy Awards representing Lebanon and Labaki's *Capernaum* won the Jury Prize at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival and has been nominated for the Best Foreign-Language Film category of the 76th Annual Golden Globe Awards.

Despite their worldwide success, Ziad Doueiri's movies stir lots of controversy, especially in Lebanon. When the director decided to shoot *The Attack* (2011) in Israel, it drew widespread condemnation from Arab countries and ignited a fierce debate over the way Arab artists should deal with politics, Israel and historical memory. Eventually, all the Arab League's members, including Lebanon (which had previously cleared the film for the country's movie theatres), boycotted the film. Also *The Insult* has aroused controversy in Lebanon, with a number of people calling for its boycott. The movie has been accused of supporting Christian propaganda and offering a revisionist history lesson. Pierre Abi Sa'b, for example, deputy editor-in-chief of Lebanon's *al-Akhbar* newspaper, wrote in an op-ed that the movie conceals "a dangerous and worrisome ideological project" and – with *The Attack* – "is offensive to the Palestinian cause, in collusion with its enemies". At the heart of the polemic, is the 1975 massacre perpetrated by the Palestine Liberation Organization in the Maronite Christian town of Damur, which portrays Palestinians not only as victims but also as responsible for atrocities during the Lebanese civil war.

The instability of the Syrian market has resulted in multiple producers relocating to Lebanon and UAE and being housed in their respective media zones. According to the Arab Media Outlook 2016-2018 report, despite the uptake from the Gulf countries, Lebanon has also become a key hub for format shows development, typically created by the Dutch house *Endemol* (ie *Deal or No Deal* airing on MTV) and the British company *FremantleMedia* (ie *Star Academy* of LBCI), not the least due to its broadcasting relations with Dubai and its resident industry talent.

The contemporary Lebanese theatre scene was reborn in the late 1960s, in a context of revolutionary upheavals related to the Arab defeat against Israel in 1967 and to May '68. The country's theatres include: *al-Madina* Theatre in the Hamra district of Beirut, an elite theatre that also offers an innovative programme. *Douwar el-Shams* (The Sunflower Theatre) is a pioneer in the field of shows for children (puppet theatre, in particular) and has been recognised throughout the Arab world and even in Europe.

Some companies (ie Collective Kahraba, Zoukak Company) work to bring performances to areas that never access cultural activities, making them free of charge to ensure accessibility to the largest number of people. Zoukak Company, in collaboration with local and international organizations, leads a wide number of psychosocial interventions based on drama therapy, targeting various groups of populations in marginalized contexts, such as abused women, youths and children, incarcerated youths, disabled children, foreign domestic workers, migrants and refugees. (For example, in November 2018, after a theatre workshop, they staged a performance with Lebanese former political prisoners in Syria).

After the Civil War with the concentration of cultural life in Beirut, the rare cultural spaces in the South of the country were left to wither away. The cities of Tyre and Nabatieh remained without a single cinema or theatre. However, Palestinian-Lebanese actor and director Kassem Istanbouli has conceived the ambitious project of reviving the tradition of theatre and cinema in the South of Lebanon. The Istanbouli Theatre opened in Tyre in 2013 and soon proved so popular that a year later it moved to the premises of al-Hamra Cinema, Tyre's most prestigious pre-war venue. In 2015, Kassem Istanbouli restored and reopened another cinema in Nabatieh. The Istanbouli Theatre has hosted performers from several countries. All events, workshops and drama classes are free of charge. The major challenge facing Istanbouli is attracting a diverse audience. "People don't know about theatre," he said in an interview to India Stoughton. "They're not used to going to the cinema, to concerts. We need to change this... It's important that we do theatre in the street [because] if there's no public, there's no theatre."

Wadih Sabra, composer of the Lebanese national anthem, founded the Music School in 1910. It became the Lebanese National Conservatory in 1929, the first of its kind in the Middle East. Since the middle of the 20th century, the crown jewel of

Lebanese music has been world-renowned Fairouz (born in 1935), a living icon and the voice of the Arab people. She and her collaborators, composers Assi Rahbani and Mansour Rahbani, rose to prominence at a time when Lebanon was finding its national identity, following the end of French rule in 1946. Other long-established figures, such as Sabah, Majida el-Roumi etc, not only have dominated the national scene, but have been followed and admired all over the Arab World.

In the post Civil War period, Lebanon has continued to export popular music to the rest of the Arab World. The 1990s and 2000s saw the rise of Lebanese pop divas such as Nancy Ajram, Haifa Wehbe and Elissa. These singers, with their racy videos and suggestive lyrics, have received divisive judgements and often aroused controversy especially in more conservative milieus (in 2003 there were protests in Bahrain when Nancy Ajram made a concert). The coverage of their love lives, appearance (and plastic surgery) by entertainment media made them ubiquitous figures in the Arab world, very popular among teenagers and young adults. Nowadays, new bands are trying to merge their traditional identity with a foreign and more globalised taste. These musicians can be considered “alternative” in relation to the former “more commercial” pan-Arab pop scene constantly reproduced by Saudi satellite TV stations. *Who Killed Bruce Lee* is an alternative Lebanese rock band currently based in Germany. Yasmine Hamdan (who has started out in the popular duo *Soap Kills*) is now based in Paris and as a singer has enjoyed big success in the European and Arabic music scenes. Probably one of the most successful bands is the indie rock *Mashrou' Leila* whose lyrics tackle taboos and controversial themes of Arab societies, and highlight Lebanon's fragile and dysfunctional political life. There is a great variety of confessional backgrounds among these musicians, however the majority of them belongs to upper-middle-class families, and many were educated at international universities or art institutes in Beirut. They support civil society activism and campaigns, opposing reactionary cultural, social, religious or political values, but all too often reach mainly cosmopolitan, educated urban elites or foreign audience. In 2014, *Mashrou' Leila* featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, but as scholar Andrew Hammond points out: “[the] Western interest [...] was in part a consequence of the Arab Spring, which was interpreted to some extent as the revolt of modern Westernized youths against an old, more ‘Arab’ order. The avowed homosexuality of the lead singer Hamed Sinno seemed to fit the theme” (p 30). In different occasions, the band has been criticized, banned from concerts and attacked. In 2016, *Mashrou' Leila* was not allowed to perform in Amman, Jordan, due to the content of the song's lyrics. In 2019, the group was victim of a boycott campaign launched by Lebanese religious leaders and a subsequent ban for the group to participate at the Byblos International Festival. The accuse moved by Christian religious authorities comes from considering a song produced in 2015 as offensive to Christianity. Solidarity and support were shown by many among the fans and artists, even by the most famous Lebanese artist Marcel Khalife.

Lebanese religious leaders are often treated as authentic representatives of their sects and are given broad powers over religious affairs. However, their leadership is not organic, nor are they necessarily popular, as these individuals are selected by clerical and political elite institutions, not by popular mandate. There are a number of Sunni Muslim religious leaders in Tripoli, Sidon and in some neighbourhoods of Beirut who enjoy a certain degree of popularity, but none of them has emerged at a national level. On the other hand, also among the Maronites there are emerging figures that have influence on TV (ie *Télé Lumière*), whilst *Manar TV* offers broad coverage to Shiites preachers. Lebanese high-profile religious leaders often use their platform to influence their followers for or against specific policies and/or politicians. For example, as reported by scholar Alexander D. M. Henley, Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rahi caused stirs in March 2011 and again in May 2016 by staging dialogues with Hezbollah; also *shaykh* Abd al-Amir Qabalan, at the time deputy head of the Higher Shiite Islamic Council, used his *'Id al-Adha* sermon in October 2013 to call on Hezbollah to surrender its weapons to the state and to stop sending fighters to Syria.

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Conclusions

Conclusion

In recent years, the Lebanese media landscape has been facing one of its deepest crisis since the formal end of the civil war more than a quarter of century ago. In a highly polarised regional ecosystem characterised by a proliferation of extremist, simplistic (“with us or against us”) and populist language, local reporters and news editors are exposed on a daily basis to huge pressures from the upper echelons of their respective media institutions. The priority of the newsrooms and of the agenda-setting makers has increasingly become the safeguard of the “security-and-stability” *vis-à-vis* the “terroristic threats” at the expense of the needs to reaffirm the principles of freedom of press and media independency. Moreover, in comparison with the 2000s, the economic crisis has deepened the precarious conditions of many journalist, photo reporters and cameramen, making them more vulnerable and more easily subjected to blackmail by politicians and local and regional media tycoons.

The economic default and the decay of the credibility of the political leadership opened for Lebanon an unclear transitional period. Despite the anti-sectarianism protests going on since October 2019, the media sector seems doomed to follow the traditional political-religious formula in the future as well. The risk of polarisation is evident: first, many outlets were created ad hoc by politicians or through the contributions of local or foreign supporters, their production will maintain the purpose of serving and promoting the faction whose they are the mouthpiece. Second, the emergence of new and independent outlets will not be sustainable without a constant source of funds and as the protests evolve, it becomes harder to produce and broadcast products that might address the whole audience. Lastly, the traditional political élite remains the main source of funding for the media in Lebanon, able to maintain the power over a sensitive part of the media production and broadcasting.

However, despite the absence of a real and effective protection mechanism for harassed or abused reporters and within a context where there is no clear path toward professionalisation, Lebanese journalists continue to seem to be the most lively and active in the region. Most of them are fluent in at least one European language and many are very familiar with European and North-American media contexts. Furthermore, they enjoy a long tradition of access to foreign media. This is the reason why, against the profound difficulties and constant threats clouding the Lebanese media landscape, signs of hope still remain on the horizon indicating that journalists will continue to report in relatively free conditions compared to the surrounding countries.

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