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#speakup
BAROMETER

LEBANON
ASSESSING DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

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Supported by the

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Lebanon

moderate

advanced

high

Level of Digital Participation

low

low

high
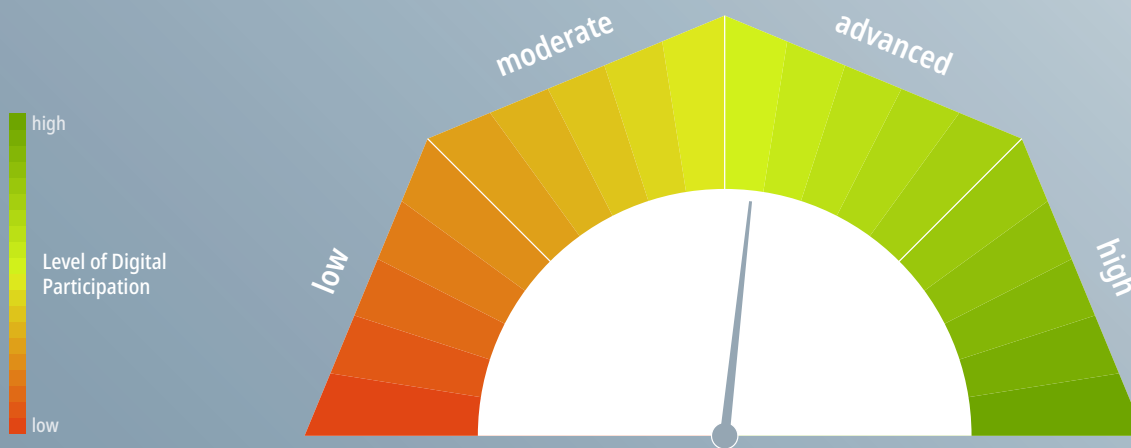
The overall results of the #speakup barometer research suggest that the level of digital participation in Lebanon is at an advanced level as the needle is pointing into the green section of the barometer.

Key Findings

Lebanon's entrepreneurial landscape is slowly beginning to blossom. Lebanon is home to the second biggest start-up scene in the region, despite the fact that access to the Internet remains costly and Internet speed is still slow due to a lack of fibre connections. Social media has proven to be a powerful engagement tool for Lebanese people to debate political and social issues and to pressure the government. More and more media companies are betting on the expansion of digital media but the government's strategy remains unclear. A lack of legislation to protect freedom of expression online and a spike in related arrests means digital rights are suffering. But a new law for freedom of expression online might soon be on the way.

ACCESS
Lebanon's ICT sector is characterized by weak infrastructure, expensive mobile services, and a digital urban-rural divide. But government leaders say they're working on improvements.

DIGITAL RIGHTS
Compared to Arab countries, Lebanon has few restrictions in place regarding online content. A lack of legislation to protect freedom of expression online and a spike in related arrests means digital rights are suffering.

MEDIA AND JOURNALISM
Lebanon is home to a diverse media landscapes — but digital media is still developing. Yet, politicians own most of the media outlets and the number of people arrested for exercising their freedom of speech has spiked.

SOCIETY
Civil society organizations and activists in Lebanon are increasingly using the internet to express their ideas and raise awareness of issues. But some groups need greater protection in the digital sphere.

INNOVATION
Lebanon has the right ingredients for a big innovation scene — it is already number two in the region. But Lebanon is small, so it has to think global.

Lebanon

high

Level of Digital Participation

low

Access

Innovation

Digital Rights

Society

Media and Journalism
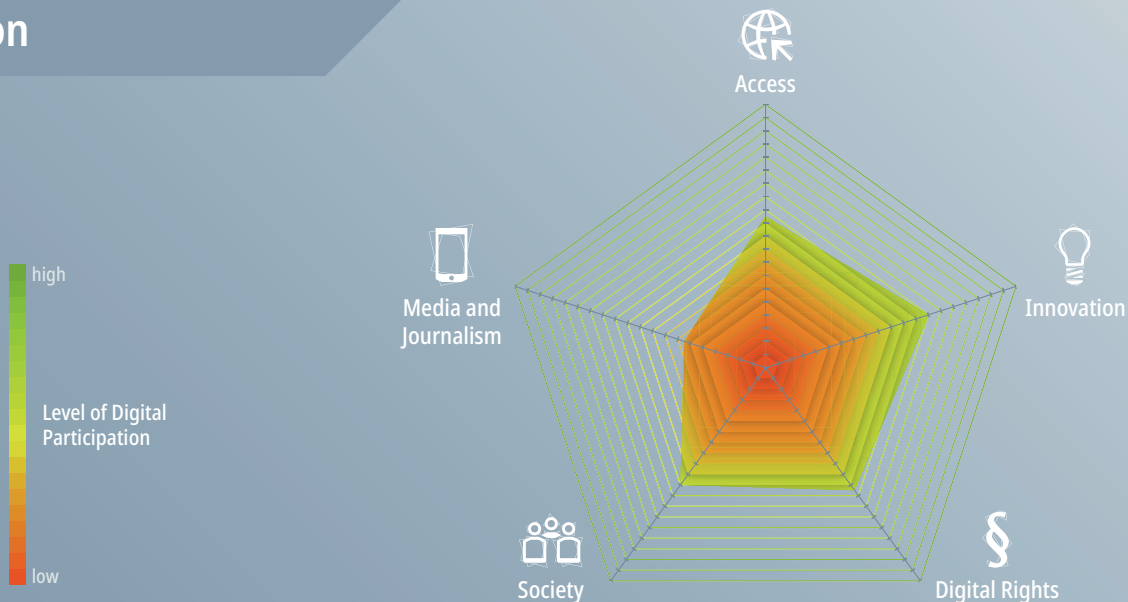
Specific results for various factors influencing digital participation in Lebanon. The better the results in a specific cluster, the more the color field extends to the greener, outer edge of the web. Internet access remains costly, but social media has proven to be a powerful engagement tool.

Access: Lebanon — Telecommunication in government hands

Lebanon's ICT sector is characterized by weak infrastructure, expensive mobile services, and a digital urban-rural divide. But government leaders say they're working on improvements.

Summary

– The telecommunications industry is largely government-owned and tightly regulated.
– State-owned telecom company OGERO has launched a national internet strategy.
– Internet access is still costly
– Internet speed is still below global averages and subject to regional differences.
– People are often reliant on cafés and co-working spaces for stable internet.

Access

low
moderate
advanced
high

The overall Level of Digital Participation for Access: **advanced**

Ali Sleiman prefers to work from home. The editor of Naastopia, a Facebook platform, lives in Rashidieh, a Palestinian refugee camp for in southern Lebanon. "We are trying to counteract the negative image of us that is often presented in the Lebanese media", Sleiman said. That's why the platform focuses on suc-

cess stories. "And we mostly present them in the form of short videos."

But the camp's poor internet connection makes his work challenging. "I usually receive one or two videos from nine corre-

spondents each week via a file-hosting service," he explains. "It takes a long time to download the material, edit it and upload it again to Facebook." He says many of the camp's residents share a Wi-Fi connection in order to save money. Sometimes, Sleiman uses the 4G connection on his mobile phone to do his work, because it's much faster. "But I can only do that if the network coverage allows it. Otherwise, I leave the camp and go work in an internet café."

Ogero determines the prices

The Rashidieh camp is just 85 kilometers from the Lebanese capital, Beirut. But anyone who wants to access high speed internet needs to either live there or be prepared to dig deep into their pocketbooks. Even then, internet speed is often disappointing.

The country's telecommunications industry is largely in state hands and is subject to strict controls. A single company, Ogero (Telecom Review 2018), owns the infrastructure for phone and internet connections; it then sells licenses to service providers. Ogero also consults with the government to determine Wi-Fi pricing and manages over a dozen different internet service providers such as Cyberia, Terranet, Sodetel and IDM. Lebanon also has two state-run mobile phone companies, Alfa and Touch. Prices for internet service are linked to internet speeds, and there is virtually no competition between the two companies, since they share the market equally.

Ogero lowered prices for internet service following protests in 2017 (SMEX 2017). "We have reached a new stage where we could give citizens the right to access cheap and fast internet," former Telecommunications Minister Jamal Jarrah said at the time. But the cost of mobile internet remains relatively high, compared with other countries in the region. As of January 2018, 500 MB from Alfa or Touch cost $10 (€8,50); 5 GB cost $23 (€20).

DSL prices have also been reduced to half of what they were before the reform. Currently, for 2 Mbps for unlimited data (unlimited GB) customers pay around $40, or $60 for 4 Mbps. at For $15 per month, consumer can chose to use less data (capped at 40 GB) at a speed of 4 Mbps. In Lebanon, minimum wage workers earn just $450 a month. Some companies with close ties to the government are able to negotiate subsidized rates for internet service. Every time the government decides to lower the prices for internet services, it needs to issue a decree.

Internet cafes and co-working spaces gaining in popularity

Internet cafes are extremely popular in Lebanon. Most of the owners of such cafes have signed expensive contracts with internet providers, allowing them to offer a faster network to their customers. Many customers often sit for hours with their laptops or mobile phones, working, researching or just surfing the internet. The same goes for co-working spaces. "The conventional way of renting an office and fitting it out is very costly", said Zina Bdeir Dajani, founder and head of the co-working

space Antwork in Beirut. In addition to weak internet infrastructure, Lebanon also suffers from daily power outages. In Beirut and its surroundings, the outages are fixed at three hours per day. In other cities, it's often more than three hours; in the refugee camps, outages of six to seven hours a day are common. "We've had a lot of trouble during the summer, with no electricity—but we were operational 24 hours a day", said Bdeir Dajani. The fact that co-working spaces always have power and internet makes them very well-frequented in Lebanon.

Despite Ministry of Telecommunications's statements that internet speed has improved, the fact remains that Lebanon lags behind (Executive Magazine 2015). A speed test by OOKLA confirms that the broadband download speed is 6.75 Mbps (as of February 2019), whereas the global average is 55.58 Mbps. On the other hand, Lebanon's mobile internet connection is above the global average of 25.27 Mbps, with a rate of 40.07 Mbps per download—plus the availability of 4G networks.

Fiber optic cables to replace copper

But this progress does not yet match the level needed to turn Lebanon into an epicenter of the digital economy. According to estimates, 80 to 90 percent of residents have internet access, and nearly 70 percent of households have broadband access—a trend that is on the rise. Network coverage outside of Beirut is already shaky, but the situation in the refugee camps is much worse as the infrastructure there is much more fragile.

In February 2018, Ogero CEO Imad Kreidieh announced a new strategy for Lebanon, Project FTTX (The Daily Star 2018). The fiber optic cable network is to be expanded and made available to almost all households and offices within three and a half years, replacing the country's outdated copper wire infrastructure. It's not yet certain whether the plan will be implemented by 2022, as the country's internet expansion strategy has changed from minister to minister. But even when fast internet is one day readily available in Lebanon, Ali Sleiman is under no illusion that the residents of the refugee camps will benefit.

> ❝ And even if it is available, it will most likely be far too expensive.
>
> **Ali Sleiman**, Naastopia

Although the telecommunications infrastructure is to be modernized, administrative, technical and financial questions are still adjudicated by the ministry on the basis of two decrees—numbers 126 and 127—dating from 1959. A 2002 law is not fully applied. The country's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) is ostensibly an independent body, but various political groups have been able to exert influence over it. The last government refused to recognize the TRA, arguing that it had not implemented its targets, including the privat-

ization of the telecommunications sector. For all intents and purposes, the Ministry for Telecommunications maintains the biggest sway over the country's ICT sector.

The telecommunications branch is among the highest income generators for the government, which in part uses the funds generated to offset its debts. Should problems with capital flow arise, it will inevitably impact mobile operators' interactions with their customers.

Recommendations

A strategy for better, more affordable internet
Quality and speed are not only impacted by the country's incomplete infrastructure, but also by the absence of a clear policy from the Ministry of Telecommunications. Faster and cheaper internet should be a priority for each minister and not shift with a change of minister.

No regional difference
Every citizen should have the option to get fast internet. Increasing speeds in the Bekaa area of Lebanon, for example, should be a priority, says Mohamad Najem of Smex.

§ Digital Rights: Despite a permissive online environment, digital freedom is on the decline

Compared to Arab countries, Lebanon has few restrictions in place regarding online content. A lack of legislation to protect freedom of expression online and a spike in related arrests means digital rights are suffering.

Summary

– Lebanon's LGBTQ community is under threat when it comes to their digital rights.
– Grindr, an app, has been blocked by the Ministry of Telecommunication.
– Around 50 websites in total have been blocked.
– The number of arrests of citizens, journalists and activists who made critical statements online has spiked in the past year.
– Lebanon has no laws in place to protect freedom of expression online.

Digital Rights

low
moderate
advanced
high

§

The overall Level of Digital Participation for Digital Rights: **advanced**

On most days, traffic crawls through Beirut's crowded streets—so when a military checkpoint forces all cars to drive in a single lane, the outcry is especially loud. Soldiers randomly stop vehicles, proceeding to check drivers, their passengers—and their mobile phones. For some people, it's more than just an annoyance—they could end up getting arrested. "For the LGBTQ community, there's the issue of having a dating app like Grindr on their phones. When security forces at checkpoints see the icon on a phone, people can be illegally detained," said Grant Baker, researcher at SMEX, the Social Media Exchange, in Beirut.

Grindr is one of the most popular dating apps in the queer community. But in early 2019, the government partially restricted

access to the app. "It was blocked on Touch, which is one of the mobile operators, but it wasn't blocked on Alpha or via Wi-Fi," explained Baker. The Ministry for Telecommunication is reported to have illegally ordered the restriction. "It wasn't very transparent, so we've relied on sources," said Baker. An anonymous Touch employee told SMEX that the ministry ordered the blockade on 3G and 4G networks. Other sources at SMEX, who also remain anonymous, have confirmed that the ministry was involved.

This kind of treatment of the LGBTQ community is unusual for Lebanon. Article 125 of the E-Transaction and Personal Data Protection act, which came into effect in 2019, requires

that the courts decide over the blockade of any websites, online content, and/or apps. But in the case of Grindr, it appears the ministry took matters into its own hands, as there is no evidence of any legal decision having been made on the matter. In the meantime, the app is now accessible again, in response to pressure from civil society. But Lebanon's Maharat Foundation reports a more restrictive approach to the LGBTQ community overall—whether on the streets or online.

Legal situation for journalists
Compared to other countries in the region, Lebanon has blocked relatively few websites and/or apps. Only approximately 50 websites are on the banned list, and most have to do with pornography, illegal betting or Israel. One LGBTQ website is on the list. Besides this list, the internet is freely accessible to the people of Lebanon. SMEX has documented all the blocked websites, just as it documents any arrests in connection with freedom of expression.

The most frequent type of censorship in the blogosphere and among media outlets—many of which are owned by politicians or political parties—is self-censorship. Users are more worried than they were previously about openly expressing their opinion on controversial issues on the Internet, as the number of people arrested for making critical statements online—whether about politics or religion—has increased. While there were five such arrests in 2016, SMEX recorded 41 arrests in 2018.

"If something was written on the Internet, such as on social media platforms, they refer it directly to the Cyber-Crime Bureau, because they say the crime has been committed with an online tool," said Layal Bahnam of the Maharat Foundation. Usually, it is a charge of defamation, she added. Frequently, those arrested have no idea why they've been summoned or detained. "So, they have to go there [to the police station] to discover why they have been summoned," she said. Sometimes, media organizations will receive a tip-off from an influential person, warning them to delete a certain statement about a politician, for example.

Unfettered access to data
At least one case in 2018 resulted in a prison sentence. Of those detained, some were forced to pay a fine, and others were allowed to go after a few hours, provided they signed a statement promising never to make a similar statement about the given person again.

Cabinet also passed a law, allowing security officials unfettered access to all telecommunications metadata for a period of four months up to one year. Government-owned telecom companies Alfa and Touch are obligated to comply.

And yet, Daraj founders Diana Moukalled and Alia Ibrahim agree: the situation in Lebanon is much better than elsewhere in the region. Whereas journalists in Lebanon enjoy extensive freedom, the situation for their colleagues in Egypt is very different. There, many of the journalists who work for Daraj write under a pseudonym. Ultimately, Lebanon's media landscape is diverse, and—generally speaking—criticism is possible.

New media laws on the horizon
Lebanon's constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. However, there is as of yet no law to protect freedom of opinion on the internet. The country's Publications Act protects unionized journalists from arbitrary arrest and interrogation, but "that does not explicitly refer to electronic publishing and websites," according to the 2018 Freedom on the Net report.

The authorities rely on the penal code—which has fewer protections for individuals—when they want to summon or punish journalists for statements made online. In this regard, the Freedom on the Net report from 2018 labels Lebanon as "partly free."

The Maharat Foundation, in cooperation with a former member of parliament, drafted a new media law in 2010. The draft was presented to elected officials, and registered as bill 441/2010. The bill aims to guarantee internet freedom as a basic right for every citizen. Activists are optimistic that, under the country's new government, it may finally become law. Senior MP George Adwan, who chairs the parliament's Administration and Justice Committee, promised to increase efforts to pass a new media law later this year. "This coming year is very important. There is momentum," said Maharat Foundation President Roula Mikhail. She's choosing to remain optimistic about the future, even if many Lebanese remain skeptical about the level of political will necessary to turn the promise of a new media law into reality.

Recommendations

Fewer blocked websites
"We want to reduce the number of websites being blocked," says Mohammad Najem from SMEX. To that end, the organization is collecting data. "In the future, we want to build up a legal team, so that we can start challenging these cases in the courts. We want to raise awareness about digital privacy."

A new law to protect freedom of speech online
Lebanon currently has no law to protect freedom of expression online similar to the Publications Act, which protects unionized journalists from undue detainment and interrogation by the police. For this reason, parliament should pass an Access to Information Law that protects against arrests. There is also a lack of industry self-regulation in Lebanon. "There is the National Audiovisual Council, but it doesn't have any executive powers, and it's also affiliated with politicians," says Layal Bahnam from the Maharat Foundation. An independent institution is needed.

Media and Journalism: Lebanon's media landscape — struggling with digitalization and media freedom

Lebanon is home to a diverse media landscapes—but digital media is still developing. Yet, politicians own most of the media outlets and the number of people arrested for exercising their freedom of speech has spiked.

Summary

– Lebanon's media is very partisan.
– The media in Lebanon suffers from a lack of funds.
– Media start-ups generally target a pan-Arab audience.
– No university degrees in media management or media viability.
– The number of detentions related to freedom of expression spiked in 2018.
– A law for the protection of freedom of speech online is under discussion in 2019.

Media and Journalism

low
moderate
advanced
high

The overall Level of Digital Participation for Media and Journalism: **moderate**

Diana Moukalled, Alia Ibrahim and Hazem al-Amine are three Lebanese journalists with many years of experience working for traditional media houses, both on television and in print. But in particular during the Arab uprisings, they became frustrated with how biased the media in Lebanon is, and wanted to draw a line in the sand by promoting independent and critical journalism. In response, they founded Daraj in 2018.

In-depth journalism needed

Daraj—Arabic for stairs—is a more than an appropriate name for the website, which has high ambitions. "Everybody was talking about independent media. We saw new media as a new means of information transfer, as technology has become cheaper and more accessible with the use of social media. So, we thought we could do something," says Alia Ibrahim. When the three pitched their project, potential investors were initially very cautious.

But they were sure that "strong, independent journalism is in demand and that it could be a good business." Subsequently, they have sold a self-produced documentary, as well as finding international donors to support the project. In addition, over the next five years, they hope to generate enough advertising and marketing revenue to secure their financial sustainability.

According to a study by the Maharat Foundation in Beirut, financing is a major issue for many media start-ups in Lebanon. "In fact, there are not many media start-ups in Lebanon. These companies face major challenges, including the inability to generate revenue, the type of content, and the number of readers, and the innovation in the offer on these media platforms."

Influential politicians

Due to the expansion of digital media worldwide, citizens in Lebanon have access to a variety of news platforms—whether websites, cable channels, or various subscription-based text message services. Although regional broadcasters such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and other international news channels are available, local news channels and their websites remain popular. Lebanon's media landscape is predominantly under the control of sectarian groups—whether it be TV, radio, print or online. It is important to note that the political system in Lebanon is characterized by religious proportionality: A total of 18 denominations are officially recognized, but three big groups dominate by means of an institutionalized balance of power in parliament. The smaller religious groups are guaranteed certain contingents of parliamentary seats.

Some broadcasters are owned by individual politicians; some are allied with specific political parties or their coalitions. Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his family, for example, own the TV channel Al Mustaqbal, the "The Daily Star" newspaper as well as numerous other online and offline media organizations. Parliamentary President Nabih Berri owns shares in the National Broadcasting Network and its affiliates, while Hezbollah controls a huge media network, which includes Al Manar TV and Al Nour Radio. In addition, the structure of the Lebanese media landscape encourages foreign entities—especially Saudi Arabia and Iran—to invest in these companies in order to expand their influence.

Small country, many media outlets

With 10 private dailies in three languages and over 1,500 weekly or monthly magazines, Lebanon produces almost half of the Middle East's periodicals, according to a Reporters Without Borders study. In addition, there are also nine TV stations and around 40 radio stations and 370 diverse

Lebanon has a diverse media landscape. More and more media companies are betting on the expansion of digital media but strategy remains unclear. Al-Mustaqbal, for example, recently shut down its daily newspaper—pressure from the online sector had grown too strong, forcing them to put more emphasis on digital media. But the cedar state has repeatedly found itself in difficult political situations. Sometimes, the country lacks a president for an extended period of time, or the formation of a new government drags on for several months—and the economy has remained weak throughout. Journalists in Lebanon might agree that digitalization is positive for their work, but they also complain that their employers have not yet taken advantage of its full potential.

> 66 We developed the business plan and presented it to investors. But they did not think it would be viable. We were proposing independent journalism. They wanted something that focused more on lifestyle.
>
> **Alia Ibrahim,** Daraj

As journalist and journalism teacher Daoud Ibrahim says, "Many media companies have not yet managed to adapt themselves to new developments in technology." Overall, the websites of many media houses do not meet current online journalistic standards, although, according to the expert, certain websites, such as www.naharnet.com, do exist that at least know how to use multimedia tools.

Blogs want the media to be more critical

Aware of the importance of social media, all media outlets in Lebanon are active on at least one platform, usually Facebook. "For a digital strategy to work, you need money and the awareness that online journalism is more than just repeating a certain program or news segment on a different platform," says the journalist. Thus far, the inclusion of citizen journalism remains the purview of TV programs, although there are a few blogs, such as Blog Baladi or Gino's Blog, that comment on events occurring in Lebanon. Najib Mitri co-founded Blog Baladi (Arabic for my country's blog) eight years ago with a friend and now has more than 73,000 followers on Facebook. He does not see himself as a competitor to mainstream media outlets: "Most of the blogs are run by passionate writers who write for a cause or for fun; blogs will not take over. But it pushes media to

be more objective and more critical than just following what is happening." Although certain blogs have gained in popularity, they are not considered major influencers of social and political life in the country, especially since many Lebanese remain loyal to their sectarian media outlets—including in the digital realm.

Recommendations

Quality content vs. clickbait

Journalist Daoud Ibrahim thinks it's important to emphasize context and analysis. Online journalism is not just about "clickbait." As Maharat Foundation writes, "The quality of media content is the basic criterion for consumption in a symmetrical relationship where demand increases as quality increases and decreases when it is lost."

Specialization as a journalist

Ramy Boujawdeh, deputy director of Berytech, a support ecosystem for entrepreneurs, hopes for more journalists who can write about issues such as digitalization, start-ups, and innovation, in order for this sector to also be reflected in the media landscape.

New media law

In Lebanon, there is no law to protect a journalist's freedom of expression online. Lebanon needs a new media law that includes the online sector, to keep pace with digital developments.

Journalistic independence

The legal situation for journalists must be improved in order for digital media in Lebanon to gain a firmer footing. To enable digital media to play their role as a reliable and independent source of information, financing and digitalization within the sector also need to be improved.

Society: A bright moment for online activism in Lebanon

Civil society organizations and activists in Lebanon are increasingly using the internet to express their ideas and raise awareness of issues. But some groups need greater protection in the digital sphere.

Summary

– Digital activism is playing a greater role in Lebanon.
– Internet penetration has increased; more than 80 percent of the population has a smartphone.
– WhatsApp and Facebook are the most widely used apps in Lebanon.
– Digitalization has proved especially beneficial to refugees.

Society

low
moderate
advanced
high

The overall Level of Digital Participation for Society: **advanced**

Lara and Marwan are a couple, and they're interested in spicing up their love life with online erotic messages. But there's a problem. Neither of them trusts Lebanese Internet providers, nor any of the various international messaging services. But they're determined to fulfill their desire, so they look for advice on the web page for SMEX, Social Media Exchange. The Beirut-based organization is committed to a free, open, diverse and dynamic internet.

A digital campaign

What sounds like an excerpt from the life of a real couple is actually a comic, part of an educational campaign by SMEX on the topic of sexting and sextortion. On a poster titled "Aleph Ba Nudes,"—the ABC of nude images—Lara and Marwan talk in little speech bubbles about how they should approach sexting. There's another poster about the data security of dating apps. But the campaign extends beyond posters. "When you finish reading the comic, it takes you to a guide that you can download on your phone and is shareable with your friends on WhatsApp and so on. It tells you how you can maintain your privacy while using a dating app and it also gives you information about what kind of data each of the dating apps collects about you," says Azza Al Masri, a researcher at SMEX. According to a new on mobile connectivity study by the Pew Research Center, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app in Lebanon, used by at least eight out of ten people.

Protecting yourself against extortion

Intimate videos, voice messages or photos sent in confidence to a partner do not always remain with that person. Sextortion—extorting someone by threating to publicize intimate data about them unless they pay money—is a growing problem in Lebanon.

The hashtag campaign #MeshAyb (not shameful) aims to educate people by showing them how to protect themselves without leaving the digital sphere, resorting to self-censorship, or abandoning the internet to those with nefarious intentions. Since women are among the most affected, the posters can be found in the women's toilets of cafes, bars and restaurants all over Beirut.

Activists profit from digitalization

While there is still no discernible digital journalism strategy in Lebanon, activists have long benefited from digitalization. In recent years, both civil society organizations and individual actors have used the Internet as their crucial tool for expanding the reach of their campaigns and enhancing awareness of their issues.

With the help of digital activists, issues such as the plight of migrant and domestic workers have received more attention in the media. Even Lebanon's ongoing trash disposal problem achieved global notoriety thanks to the 2017 hashtag #youstink, which increased pressure on the government. The problem has yet to be resolved, however.

There have also been victories for freedom of expression. In 2018, for example, the Lebanese band The Great Departed accused iTunes' Middle East platform of blocking uploads of some of their songs, ostensibly because their lyrics were deemed "inappropriate for the Arab world." A content aggregator in Dubai is thought to have blocked the upload. In response, SMEX and The Great Departed launched a petition on Change.org. Two days later, an iTunes employee made the songs available for upload via an alternative route.

Smartphones, a constant companion

Digital participation in social processes has had many positive effects for Lebanon's population.According to the Pew study, 66 percent of Lebanese adults agree that the internet has positively impacted education. Darine, a young Syrian woman who fled her country's civil war and has been in Beirut since 2018, agrees: She has benefited greatly from the freedom she has in Lebanon to use the internet in all its diversity, including for school and for researching her eventual course of studies. She also appreciates having access to different sources of news and information. Unlike many other countries in the region, the Lebanese government has only blocked around 50 websites. For Kholoud H., who was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon and has had access to the Internet via her smartphone for the last seven years, digitalization offers many benefits. She is able to stay in touch with her family, which was scattered across the globe after their 1948 expulsion from Palestine. She uses platforms such as Facebook as well as messaging apps to stay in touch. "I also get job offers via email and am able to respond to them much faster," she says.

> **"** There's approximately one case of sextortion reported every day in Lebanon. The main targets are women and LGBTQ community members.
>
> **Grant Baker,** SMEX

Growing concern about social media

In 2018, Internet penetration across Lebanon's population was at almost 80 percent, while some 86 percent of those over the age of 18 own a smartphone — including a large percentage of people over the age of 50. With such a high number of smartphone users, it's no surprise that social networks also play a significant role in people's digital lives. Facebook, Google and YouTube are freely accessible, and thus among Lebanon's most frequented websites — even if a growing number of Lebanese are concerned about the negative impacts of social media. As the Pew study concludes, "Lebanese are notably less positive about the impact of social media on society." That concern stems in part from the fact that in the last year, the number of arrests made in response to critical statements about politicians or religion has increased dramatically. Those arrested included activists and journalists, but also regular citizens.

Recommendations

Protecting people on the Internet

Organizations like SMEX are working to promote the equal participation of women, members of the LGBTQ community and other minorities in the digital sphere. At the same time, such groups require greater protection so that they can withstand the critical discourse online.

Raising awareness of privacy on the Internet

Digitalization and society have become inextricably linked and there is no going back. "I think we have issues with the legal framework, and I think we have issues with our own perception of privacy," says Mohamad Najem, director of SMEX. Lebanon is a small country with six million inhabitants. "We have a patriarchal society, where everyone knows everything about the people in the same building; kids share the same room. There's no privacy. This is part of a social norm that we are trying to change within society: your content and the exchange of your data are deserving of privacy."

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Innovation: Lebanon's innovation scene is fighting the brain-drain

Lebanon has the right ingredients for a big innovation scene — it is already number two in the region. But Lebanon is small, so it has to think global.

Summary

– Beirut's tech start-up scene is growing
– But not all entrepreneurs in Lebanon are that lucky: journalistic and media start-ups in particular have a hard time
– Most of the innovations that come from Lebanon are related to software
– The government's Circular 331 has provided a much-needed boost to the start-up scene
– Lebanon is fighting the brain-drain

Innovation

low
moderate
advanced
high

The overall Level of Digital Participation for Innovation: **advanced**

In the heart of Beirut, one building follows another on a slope — the Beirut Digital District. It's been six years since the BDD, as it's been nicknamed, was founded. "The vision was to build the hub for the digital creative community," says Stephanie Abi Adballah, spokeswoman for the BDD. There are currently ten buildings on 17,500 square meters for Beirut's innovation scene to spread out on, and expansion plans are already afoot, as the demand for space, especially for start-ups, is growing. There are also plans to rebuild an old destroyed church to create more office space for various companies.

Beirut's tech start-up scene is growing — and becoming more colorful and diverse (Startups Without Borders 2018). Even if banks and regulators do not make it easy for entrepreneurs, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is flourishing, with offerings for the Lebanese economy, especially in the areas of agri-tech, education technology and digital agencies.

But not all entrepreneurs in Lebanon are that lucky: journalistic and media start-ups in particular have a hard time getting a foot in the door of interested investors. Since the media in Lebanon is far from being independent, many potential sponsors are skeptical of the new models being presented. For that reason, only a few journalistic startups, such as Daraj and Raseef22- have managed to survive. Both mainly keep themselves afloat with financing from foreign sources, as local advertising partners are difficult to find. Within the local entrepreneurship ecosystem, commercial organizations, digital agencies and media planners were however already successful prior to the emergence of the Beirut Digital District.

Berytech — the Incubator

Some of those Start-ups were sponsored by Berytech, a com-

pany founded in 2002 which now has 3 branches in and around Beirut. At first, Berytech was an incubator for the Information and Telecommunication (ICT) sector — but they expanded to three physical incubators. ICT is still a focus, but their outlook has expanded to include agri-tech, social innovation and the digital creative sector. "We tend to work on the business modelling of the idea — the validation of the idea and how to commercialize it. We work with partners on patenting and also on internationalization," says Ramy Boujawdeh, deputy general manager at Berytech.

> " Lebanon has a good stem education — we are doing well in terms of science and math, and so they decided to create a mechanism to motivate commercial banks to invest in startups.
>
> **Ramy Boujawdeh,** Berytech

Anyone with a business idea can contact Berytech, but the company also goes on the hunt for new projects. "We run idea funds. We run hackathons. We do sessions we do talks in entrepreneurship clubs." Events such as "Just meet-up," the "Fab Lab" or the "BDD Academy" have become well-known institutions in Beirut as places to look out for or promote new entrepreneurs.

Lebanon — second in the region

"So, if you compare the region, and look at the startup index in the region, Lebanon comes second after Dubai," says Boujawdeh. Although Beirut's start-up scene is not yet comparable to Berlin or New York, the government is supporting it with the introduction of Circular 331. In 2013, the central bank decided to

promote the "knowledge economy," because they recognized its enormous potential. "They created Circular 331 — which is a mechanism where they would guarantee up to 75 percent of the banks' investments and allowed them to take up to four percent of their reserves in the central bank to invest this money in startups."

But since the banks did not know how start-ups work, the banks decided to "diversify their portfolio within Venture Capital (VC) funds." There are currently ten VCs in the Lebanese ecosystem and several incubators and accelerators. "Most of the innovations that come from Lebanon are related to software — for two reasons: Software is easy to develop, easy to scale internationally. Software doesn't cost as much as hardware or science. It was a quick win. Now we're seeing more and more of the other innovations coming up but not as fast as the software sector."

Circular 331 boosted the start-up scene

It's clear that Circular 331 has provided a much-needed boost to the start-up scene, but tech start-ups still face challenges if they really want to make it (Commerce du Levant 2018). Lebanon is a small country with a small market, so many well-educated people prefer to work abroad. "With the brain drain, we lose most of the talented people from Lebanon to the world: They don't stay here because it's easy for them to be attracted by a big company somewhere else." Those who stay behind are either not the top talents, or those who come from wealthy families and are already plugged into existing entrepreneurial networks.

That being said, Boujawdeh does not see the country's weak infrastructure, daily power outages, and expensive (and relatively slow) Internet as the biggest limiting factors for Lebanon's innovation sector. "The limiting factor is not knowing how to penetrate new markets." Considering the size of the country, this facet is of particular importance, "because when you're looking at a small population with limited digital transactions and interactions — you need to look at something bigger." For that reason, Berytech and other incubators enjoy working with entrepreneurs who have a global vision.

With his global vision, Boujawdeh has more than Western markets in mind: "I believe we have a lot of opportunities in developed and developing countries. I think we need to push more people to look at frugal innovations that could solve problems in the local context but are similar in other places." For example, they have recently developed a dating app for Saudi Arabia.

Some business transactions in Lebanon are now being handled via whatsapp — even across borders. Photos of products are sent to customers: Boujawdeh calls this "business interaction." "But when you look at Lebanon in terms of digital literacy and the digital use in the business sense, you will not find many people who do transactions online or fill out forms online." But Boujawdeh is also convinced that the younger generation is well on its way to transforming this reality.

Recommendations

New laws
Lebanon needs better commercial laws. "One of the major points in Lebanon is closing down a business in Lebanon. It is a nightmare," says Boujawdeh from Berytech. "You need to report five years of taxes before you can close down. The bankruptcy law is terrible." New laws must be passed and implemented. "I know that the government is preparing a lot of these reforms, so we're hoping that this will happen."

Circular 331 still has money
The Circular 331 funds have not been all spent yet. "There were problems due to the economic situation, that led to actually freezing some of this and slowing it down," says Stephanie Abi Abdallah. "There is a question about its continuity. And everyone is wondering what will happen next."

More Media
Lebanon needs a more diverse media start-up scene with more innovative approaches to journalism, so that journalists can develop their own subject areas and, for example, report on innovation and start-ups. Berytech also advocates this approach.

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