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LEBANON'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

EXPLORING APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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About the National Democratic Institute

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments; safeguarding elections; and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

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I. Executive Summary

The advancements in information and communication technology, which have fundamentally changed politics and society on every level and scale, have not come without consequences. The same force that provided a voice and a space for the marginalized and the oppressed, exposing perpetrators of human rights violations across the globe, has also created a fertile environment for the growth of disinformation narratives and misinformed discourse. In Lebanon, and particularly since 2019, dis and misinformation traffic has increased exponentially, affecting not only politics, but also public health and livelihoods.

The purpose of this study is twofold: to understand how the Lebanese public consumes news published on traditional and alternative media, with a focus on how they perceive and deal with disinformation campaigns and fake news, and to build a comprehensive view of the organizations and initiatives that are working on mis/disinformation in Lebanon since 2019. Understanding the media landscape and media consumption in Lebanon will inform future interventions on disinformation. The first part of the report examines the media landscape vis-à-vis the legal framework that governs broadcast and print media. It also offers a glimpse of news consumption behaviors in Lebanese society and discusses disinformation narratives that emerged around major events that have occurred in the last three years. The report will showcase how disinformation thrives in critical moments and provide analysis on the different factors that contribute to the surge in disinformation. The second part of the report presents the findings from the mapping that the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) conducted on initiatives and organizations that target mis/disinformation in Lebanon. This section also provides an assessment of some projects that were implemented in the last three years.

The report canvasses the disinformation landscape since 2019, citing examples where available, and providing background information on the social and political state of affairs as they are related to the topics of disinformation. The report also critically addresses the performance of traditional media outlets and its digital affiliates and examines the role that media outlets played in perpetuating disinformation narratives.

The report also aims to highlight the need and the potential avenues for a more nuanced and robust approach in developing and implementing counter-disinformation initiatives. The report argues that while artificial intelligence is advancing and algorithms for detecting malicious and misinformation propaganda are becoming increasingly sophisticated, new tactics are being used by disinformation agents as well. This cat and mouse routine clearly indicates that technology alone is not sufficient to counter

disinformation. To curb the spread of disinformation, a part of the investment should be directed towards social awareness programs, taking into consideration that short-term projects have not been impactful. This report makes recommendations that aim to help different stakeholders find ways to prevent the rapid spread of false narratives and their consequences on Lebanese society.

Below is the summary of the proposed recommendations:

1. Addressing disinformation requires long-term programming. Many factors play a role in the fight against misleading narratives; especially as false news is conceived to play on the emotional side and is more appealing than the truth.

2. A holistic approach to programming must be adopted, encompassing the following essential objectives:
   i. Establish and strengthen existing networks of fact-checkers, and integrate them into existing, accessible media platforms
   ii. Empowering journalists to uphold ethical and professional reporting values and practices
   iii. Transforming fact-checking into a core value in journalism
   iv. Raising public awareness on disinformation

Journalism is a high-risk profession. Journalists are subjected to threats that can affect their performance and ethical practices. They work in stressful environments, particularly in contexts of conflict or high corruption levels and lack of security. Governments are increasingly limiting the space for free press, in Lebanon and other countries in the region. The Samir Kassir Foundation's recent report on the state of press freedom during the six-year term of former president Michel Aoun establishes that there is systematic restriction of media freedoms, manifested mostly in increased summoning and interrogation of journalists by the police and the judiciary. These measures facilitate and to a large extent justify hostility against journalists and media outlets. They also significantly impact how journalists conduct their work, reducing their sense of safety and hence greatly affecting the quality and robustness of the work they produce and their determination to pursue certain stories. In such a context, there is more room for propaganda and disinformation to flourish through media outlets that were established solely to promote political constructs and narratives, and that blatantly disseminate fake news and have often been found complicit in fabricating it. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive set of actions that help journalists sustain a fair sense of safety and confidence, increase their capacity to utilize modern platforms and techniques, and re-establish industry standards as benchmarks for consumers to use in choosing their source of news.

Increasing media literacy within communities plays an important role in countering disinformation. Over the last ten years, Lebanon has seen a growing student movement

and increased youth participation in public affairs. Young men and women have been at the forefront of several confrontations with the political establishment that built up to the October 17, 2019 uprising. They have led the way in building alternative media platforms and continue to shape this landscape. Investing in youth empowerment remains as much a need as an opportunity. Including youth in the discussion on disinformation and empowering them to spearhead the battle against disinformation will contribute significantly to increasing community awareness and will reduce the social impacts of disinformation. Lastly, building collaboration between social media platforms and civil society organizations to enhance the platforms' ability to identify and respond to disinformation content. Alternative media platforms cannot, on their own, identify, analyze, and act to discredit disinformation narratives on all social, economic, and political topics, nor should they. A sustainable and long-term collaboration must be built between them and public interest organizations and lobby groups. This will enhance the platforms' capacity to identify disinformation and to conduct methodological monitoring that accounts for the thematic differences. Such a relationship should go beyond superficial engagement between big tech and civil society organizations (CSOs) and explore cooperation around a more accurate monitoring of Arabic language content and understanding of local dialects. In parallel, local CSOs should associate themselves with processes that are pushing for social networks' accountability at the global level.

II. Introduction

Since October 2019 Lebanon has experienced a period of uncertainty and turmoil that is reflected in the information ecosystem. On October 17, 2019, thousands of Lebanese people took to the street to protest government policies and new taxes, against the backdrop of a looming banking sector crisis and increased pressure on the local currency for the first time in over 27 years. The demonstrations that started in Beirut grew into nationwide protests, leading to the resignation of the cabinet headed by Saad Hariri and exposing the economic meltdown. The Covid-19 pandemic compounded the crisis, exhausting the medical sector and putting the government's emergency preparedness to the test. The Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020, which devastated the capital and sent shockwaves across Lebanon and to the Lebanese diaspora, was a turning point in Lebanese politics, in the sense that it exposed the systemic frailty of state institutions, but also, and more importantly, the malicious complicity of the ruling class in the loss of lives and livelihoods. This complicity was demonstrated most notably in the obstruction of the course of justice and the work of the two consecutive investigating judges, preventing accountability in what was described as one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history. This incident garnered increasing support for emerging independent political actors and groups in Lebanon and abroad, which contributed to a historic win of 13 independent/progressive candidates in the May 15, 2022 parliamentary election. In between the tragedy of August 4, 2022 and the "euphoria" of May 15, 2022, Lokman Slim, a pioneer of truth seeking and preservation of collective memory was assassinated on February 3, 2021.

Looking at the narratives that surrounded those events, it becomes evident that an elaborate construct is being methodically deployed to blur the evidence, fabricate misleading information, misdirect public attention, and occasionally conduct organized electronic warfare against political opponents. This apparatus utilizes an intricate infrastructure of media outlets and digital platforms.

Major media outlets in Lebanon are either direct affiliates of one of the ruling political parties or owned by politically affiliated businesspeople. There is a general distrust in the news and narratives promoted by the majority of these outlets among a significant part of the population that does not identify with the traditional political parties, and that has been disenfranchised and systemically alienated by Lebanese politics. These outlets resemble examples of state media under authoritarian regimes in that they promote a pre-established narrative rather than creating a space for debate and discussion and informing audiences using evidence-based and investigative journalism. Typically, these outlets and their online and social media affiliates present an altered

and occasionally distorted version of the facts when political interests are involved. This report will examine the misinformation landscape as related to the aforementioned socio-political events (the financial crisis, the pandemic, the October 17 uprising, and the Beirut port explosion) in addition to the parliamentary election.

In 2019, there was a surge in fact-checking and countering mis- and disinformation initiatives. This "sector," which aims at exposing and discrediting misinformation narratives and building an alternative one, needs time, and further investment, to build its own credibility and technical and professional capacity, and to build its audience. Public awareness around misinformation as a political strategy and tool, and its impact on the course of building public opinion, are limited.

Fake news and disinformation are not only affecting the information ecosystem, but also pose a grave risk on the work and life of journalists. Traditional political parties (occasionally linked to foreign actors) use armies of trolls to spread disinformation and hate speech against journalists to discredit and silence them. Supporters of these political parties organically contribute to these campaigns.

III. Methodology

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative research and was divided into two phases. In the first phase, researchers from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom at the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) created an Excel sheet of all information integrity and mis/disinformation programs in Lebanon from October 2019 until the publishing date of this report. For the study to be as comprehensive as possible, researchers conducted desk research on projects around disinformation, including calls for proposals published by donors and reports/information published by implementing organizations. SKF researchers included all programs on disinformation that SKF was involved in or aware of since 2019 and contacted several partner embassies and civil society organizations to account for potential gaps in the desk research.

A total of 46 programs, from October 2019 until the publication of this report, were entered into a database, which included the following information on the implemented programs:

- Project Name
- Donor
- Implementing Partner
- Involved Partners
- Beneficiaries
- Type of Project
- Goals
- Budget
- Time Period
- Location of Implementation
- Outcome

The research covered, to the best of the researchers' knowledge and comprehensive investigation, all projects on information integrity and mis/disinformation in Lebanon that have been implemented from October 2019 to the date of the publication of this report. However, it is likely that similar projects may have been implemented without a visible online footprint, and hence have not been identified by this research.

In the second phase of this study, the research identified, based on literature review, the major disinformation trends and narratives in Lebanon since 2019. As a second step, SKF conducted further desk research to provide a comprehensive view of the media

landscape and consumption in Lebanon. Furthermore, SKF conducted two online interviews with experts in the field of media and disinformation.

The interviewees – Layal Bahnam, Program Manager at Maharat Foundation and Mahmoud Ghazayel, journalist and fact-checker – shared their experience and the best practices based on the work they did on mis/disinformation and fact-checking. They answered the following six questions:

1. Based on your experience, what are the disinformation projects that you believe to be successful with a significant impact?

2. What type of projects proved to be the most repetitive with insignificant impact compared to the efforts/funds that were put into them?

3. What are the best ways to reach the public and raise awareness of disinformation and fact checking?

4. How can journalists and fact-checkers get more visibility and become trusted sources for the public?

5. What further efforts must CSOs put in order to counter disinformation?

6. What are the main sources of political disinformation campaigns in Lebanon on the local, regional, and international levels?

The expected result of this study is to showcase the most relevant disinformation narratives in Lebanon, in addition to identifying what past projects did to address the challenges introduced by disinformation. Furthermore, this report will highlight the best practices to counter disinformation, while pointing out the activities that must be avoided in this field due to the insignificant impact they present compared to the funds that were dedicated to the programs. The "Recommendations" section of this report was drafted based on the analysis of the findings, the answers of the interviewees and the experience that SKF has in the field of media development and content monitoring.

IV. Media Landscape and Consumption in Lebanon

The media landscape in Lebanon remains to a great extent a reflection of partisan politics, and by proxy, is a natural platform for a divisive, sectarian rhetoric that often transcends into one form or another of hate speech. The emergence of social media and the rising discontent towards politics among a large segment of the younger population paved the way for new media outlets to operate outside the boundaries of the print and broadcast media laws. Despite the relative freedoms that characterize Lebanon's media landscape and social life, compared to other countries in the region, Lebanon's divisive sectarian politics and political instability have a strong impact on the enabling environment for freedom of expression. Lebanon was historically a region with special status, largely due its demographic and confessional diversity and how this intersected with different foreign interests. This has had its effect on freedoms as it increased the common space where intercultural and political exchanges occurred.

From the early 20th century, during the Ottoman rule and the French mandate, up until the 1990s, Lebanon, despite frequent turbulence and a 15-year long civil war, was an oasis of free speech and freedom of expression in the region and a sanctuary for dissident journalists and political activists. More than 28 newspapers[1] were published during the sixties and the seventies, representing different political views. A similar archival collection on radio could not be found. However, the available information indicates that the number of radio stations was limited when compared to newspapers. In the case of television, two private enterprises ruled the landscape between 1956 and 1977, when Télé Liban, the government-owned television company, was established to oversee the management and programming in the sector and later take over broadcasting. In 1985 the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) was launched, to promote the narrative of the Lebanese Forces, one of the major Christian militias at the time. LBC became extremely popular on both sides of the political division due to its entertainment programming. Around the end of the civil war, Lebanon witnessed a television rush. With Télé Liban and LBC, the number of television stations reached 54,[2] all of which, including LBC, were not licensed. It was not until 1994 that a law governing television broadcasting was passed by parliament, providing licenses to four television stations. The number of licensed TV stations increased to six. Two religious stations

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1   Lebanese Civil War: 1975-1990: Newspapers. American University of Beirut Library Guides. Available at: https://libcat.aub.edu.lb
2   Channels of Resistance in Lebanon. Zahera Harb. March 2011. Bloomsbury Publishing.

continue to broadcast to this day without a license but with an implicit government permission. The rest of the stations were closed by the government. This was probably one of the earliest manifestations of post-war power-sharing in public administration. The law was tailored to ensure that independent voices, i.e., those that are not affiliated with ruling political or influential regional powers, are sidelined and forbidden access to airwaves. This effectively domesticated the media, maintaining very little room for alternative narratives. Unlike television, the print media landscape was already vibrant and dynamic, and continued to offer a space, however limited, for independent voices.

Political parties today remain in control of traditional media channels. However, independent media outlets have emerged in the past few years in response to the political turmoil,[3] introducing alternative rhetoric to a landscape that was, for the last decade, merely a reflection of traditional media, more or less mirroring the same political affiliations and sectarian divisions.

Given the political instability that has characterized Lebanon's state of affairs for the past 17 years, news programs are widely watched, and television remains the preferred news source for the senior population. The digitization of media has changed the landscape and the consumption behaviors significantly, but the narratives remained relatively the same. In the beginning, the digital media space echoed the voice of traditional media, with the exception of a few online journalism initiatives. The progressive social movement that manifested itself on several occasions, starting with the annual Secular March that began in 2010, the anti-sectarian protests of 2011, to the demonstrations against the postponement of elections in 2013, and the 2015 You Stink movement (protesting the government's mismanagement of the solid waste sector), had yet to find its place in the digital media space. It was not until the October 17, 2019 uprising, which ushered in a new era of journalism that combined activism with news reporting, that independent voices became increasingly present on digital media allowing for an alternative narrative to be established in the digital space. Moreover, citizen journalism is playing a crucial role in shifting the digital media landscape. According to former senior producer at Al Jazeera Amal Hamdan, the use of cellphones to capture, romanticize, and publish accounts of events has in fact increased exposure to these events. Marginalized communities, who have systematically been overlooked, are now gaining access to tools that allow them and those covering their stories to get an audience.[4]

A study conducted by the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) in 2019 shows a decline in the usage of Facebook as a primary source of news for the younger generation. The participants in the study, university students from across Lebanon, aged between 18 and 25 years old,

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3   Independent Media in Lebanon: Content Analysis and Public Appeal, The Samir Kassir Foundation, December 2020. Available at: https://www.skeyesmedia.org/documents/bo_filemanager/Independent-Media-in-LebanonEN.pdf
4   Jad Melki, Micheal J. Oghia & Khaled Nasser, Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon, Open Society Foundations, March 2012, p.29

resort to Twitter and Instagram to follow up on the events due to the quick updates that the two platforms provide. Furthermore, the study found that the young anglophone audience tends to rely on alternative media, while francophones still tend to get their news from television channels. Also, participants residing in Beirut demonstrated greater awareness related to the credibility of news shared on social media platforms than their counterparts who reside in other regions across the country; they also were highly skeptical of the reliance on news and were aware of fake news campaigns being circulated. Beirut-based participants were nevertheless influenced by their friends and family in their choice of preferred media outlets. Some of the participants in SKF's study expressed their reliance on social media accounts of local media outlets, while others used news chat groups on WhatsApp to follow up on the latest developments. The study also showed that students residing in Beirut are interested in world news, unlike respondents from rural areas. This indicates that younger urban audiences are seeking more comprehensive news sources.[5] There is an absence of data and studies on citizens' consumption of misleading news and its influence on their political views and behaviors. In July 2022, in order to understand how the Lebanese public deals with mis- and disinformation and consume news, SKF and Information International conducted a survey with a sample covering 1,000 respondents from different areas in Lebanon. The report aims to explore whether the public can distinguish between factual and fake news and if they fall victim to sharing misleading content from their social media accounts. The respondents, aged between 18 and 64, were divided into groups A and B. Participants from group A were exposed to five factual headlines and ten fake news and were asked whether they would share the pieces, under what motives, and on which social media platform. Group B participants were shown the same headlines and asked the same questions after being questioned whether they thought the articles were accurate or misleading.

The findings revealed that thinking about the accuracy of the articles had no significant impact on the respondents' tendency to share them. Male respondents were more inclined to share news compared to female respondents. The age group between 35-44 years old was most likely to share articles from their social media accounts. Furthermore, the main reason for sharing news was based on their relevance to the citizens and the confirmation of developments that echoes the narrative of the political group they support. In contrast, the main two reasons for not sharing news were the participants' certainty that they were inaccurate and the lack of interest in a given topic. Respondents were willing to share local news (38.9%) more than regional (21.7%) and international (13.5%) news. This demonstrates the more limited interest in international news among the respondents and that their attention is mostly occupied with and directed toward news related to their daily life. Finally, regarding the respondents' ability to identify the accuracy of articles, 58.7% of them were able to differentiate between factual and fake news.[6]

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5   Independent Media in Lebanon: Content Analysis and Public Appeal. Op.cit.

6   Information International, Lebanese Citizens, Disinformation, and News Sharing Behavior, SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, 6 January 2023. Available at: https://www.skeyesmedia.org/documents/bo_filemanager/SKF-News-Sharing-Behavior-Survey-2022-f.pdf

The exacerbated economic crisis imposed more pressure on alternative media outlets. Due to the collapsing banking sector, it became challenging for them to manage their finances. Furthermore, revenues from advertising are increasingly becoming insufficient for financial sustainability, and since most alternative media outlets refuse to shift to subscription-based models, many have had to seek funding from private and/or development cooperation donors.

In addition to the need for a sustainable business model, there are several limitations restricting the work of journalists and digital media. The same laws and regulations apply to both traditional and alternative media. The heavy and systematic crackdown on journalists and activists has remarkably increased, most notably during the term of President Michel Aoun, imposing restrictions on freedom of expression. Outspoken voices against the president of the country and politicians are faced with laws prohibiting defamation against public officials, creating more restrictions on the work and role of freelance journalists and media outlets.

The ambiguity of laws governing the media sector constrains the work of journalists even further. Largely due to political reasons, the Lebanese parliament stalled, until 2017, the adoption of the Access to Information law and the cabinet issued its implementation decree in 2020.[7] While the Constitution guarantees and protects the right to freedom of expression, outdated laws and decrees re-enforce restrictions on freedoms and the work of journalists. The Publication Law regulating print media was last amended in 1995, and broadcasting was last regulated by the Audiovisual Media Law in1994. Several articles in the Lebanese Penal Code breach international standards on freedom of expression. To mention a few, Article 384 criminalizes anyone who 'insults the president of the republic' with up to two years imprisonment. Articles 286 and 388 prohibit the defamation of public officials and public entities. Furthermore, Article 157 of the Code of Military Justice criminalizes contempt against the army. With an elastic and ambiguous definition of defamation and contempt, journalists and activists are often prosecuted for expressing an opinion or making a journalistic investigation. Although in most cases sentencing is restricted to the payment of a fine, individuals convicted of defamation can in fact be sentenced to prison. While there is no legislation that governs online news sites, the National Audiovisual Media Council requires online news sites to register with the Council, hence the restrictive provisions of print and broadcast media laws are transposed onto online media.[8]

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7   Media and Information Landscape in Lebanon, Internews and Maharat Foundation, 2021. Available at: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Media-and-Information-Landscape-in-Lebanon.pdf

8   Internet Legislation Atlas, Lebanon. Available at: https://internetlegislationatlas.org/#/countries/Lebanon

V. Mis- and Disinformation in Lebanon

Misinformation is the unintentional publication and dissemination of incorrect information under the assumption that it is true without an intention of causing harm. Disinformation, on the other hand, is the intentional publication of misleading and false news. The economic crisis that developed in late 2019 and the breakout of Covid-19 pandemic in the following months, together with the critical political landscape constituted an enabling environment for a sharp rise in disinformation narratives. A case study published by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, zoomed in on audio misinformation in Lebanon, particularly examining voice notes from WhatsApp mobile messaging application, collected between October 2019 and October 2020. Out of 66 voice notes collected by the research team, 35 notes contained misleading information: 14% of the notes were about the economic crisis, 31% about the pandemic, and 25% about the Beirut port explosion. The study observes an intricate communication process involved in spreading misleading information that includes five steps, four of which were consistent across the 35 notes.[9] The steps include: establishing an interpersonal relationship between the sender and the original receiver, establishing source credibility, manipulation of tone and emotions to provoke panic, and incorporating a call to action.

Disinformation is not a new practice but has been widely used during conflicts to propagate news and narratives that serve a certain political agenda. The digital transformation of the information environment has expanded the reach of disinformation and contributed to its widespread use. Social media platforms play an important role in both accelerating and curbing the circulation of fake news and false information. To limit the spread of disinformation, tech giants use artificial intelligence (AI) technology, fact checking partners, and content reporting services that allow users to report false news. However, particularly in the case of disinformation, the intent factor makes it more difficult to detect. New versions of AI-based misinformation detection technology are continuously being deployed to respond to mutations in misinformation content.[10]

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9   Misinformation Review. July 2022. Shorenstein Center of Media, Politics, and Public Policy. Available at: https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/audio-misinformation-on-whatsapp-a-case-study-from-lebanon/

10   Meta AI. 2020. Available at: https://ai.facebook.com/blog/heres-how-were-using-ai-to-help-detectmisinformation/

As Lebanon continues to grapple with the challenges surrounding identity politics, unresolved confessional strife, and extreme political polarization, disinformation can be a tool for mass destabilization. Most commonly, disinformation is used to further a political agenda. It thrives on divisive politics and feeds on distrust in the media and public institutions, of which Lebanon boasts plenty. For more than a decade, Lebanon has been going through testing times. Political deadlocks became the norm in a country whose post-civil war constitution established an ambiguous power-sharing model that could not establish long-term stability. The Syrian conflict and the consequent refugee influx into Lebanon has challenged the country's fragile social, political, and physical infrastructure. With a relentlessly rising sovereign debt, reaching 174.5% to GDP[11] and in the absence of steadfast political determination, a full-blown financial crisis was waiting to happen, until it did in 2019. A series of cataclysmic events ensued. All the boxes were ticked for disinformation to flourish.

Journalist and fact-checker Mahmoud Ghazayel states, in an interview with SKeyes, that Lebanon is constantly targeted by disinformation campaigns that are influenced, paid for, or pushed by neighboring countries. For example, a Facebook group, entitled "The Friends Travel to Belarus", which is no longer active, was promoting safe immigration to Belarus, targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon particularly. The German government accused Belarus of state-sponsored human trafficking, facilitating entry visas for refugees into Minsk against an extremely high fee, who eventually get stranded trying to get into Germany and Poland[12]. Ghazayel added that Lebanon still lacks the proper body to regulate online publications. In addition to politically driven disinformation campaigns, Ghazayel points out that he observed several commercially driven disinformation campaigns.[13] Some of the narratives are also pushed by bloggers and influencers who have a wide audience and deal lightly with political, medical, and social issues.

Major Disinformation Topics

The Syrian Refugee Crisis

Since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, which also intersected with Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian war and the consequent terrorist attacks on neighborhoods in Beirut's southern suburb, Syrian refugees became the subject of recurring disinformation campaigns, holding them responsible for Lebanon's economic crisis, crime rate increase, and more recently Covid-19 and Cholera transmission.

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11   Trading Economics. 2022. Available at: https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/government-debt-to-gdp

12   Facebook group and offers from Belarus sell migrants the European dream. The Irish Times. 10 November 2021. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/facebook-group-and-offers-from-belarus-sell-migrants-the-european-dream-1.4724910

13   Interview with journalist and fact-checker Mahmoud Ghazayel.

While refugees were welcomed and supported in some regions, they were faced with racism and discrimination in other regions. This division on the Syrian issue goes back to the decade-long interference of Syria in Lebanon and Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war. Until this day, the circulation of fake news about Syrian refugees, online and offline, builds on the existing tensions between Lebanese and Syrians and puts the country's stability at stake.[14] In 2014, Human Rights Watch reported that 45 municipalities imposed curfews on the Syrian population residing within their boundaries. In another report by HRW from 2020, 21 municipalities established curfews and/or other restrictive measures for the Syrian population, because of the Covid-19 pandemic alone. In 2017 three Syrian refugees under detention by the Lebanese Army, amid fears of having been tortured in detention.[15] In another example, a Facebook account under the name Tartous City shared a post in which it claimed that seven Syrians were found killed in Beirut and their heads were chopped from their bodies while mentioning that the source of the news is the Lebanese General Security forces. The news was picked up by Twitter users and went viral creating more tension and hatred between the two communities. The Lebanese Internal Security Forces denied the news and corrected it by posting a comment on the mentioned post.[16]

The Beirut Port Explosion

In the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, rumors and conspiracy theories were spread on all media networks. Unfounded claims were circulated regarding the nature, magnitude, and underlying target of the explosion. Tens of versions of "the real story" were passed along from one mobile phone to another, some claiming it was an Israeli missile attack on a Hezbollah weapon cache. The official government account is that the explosion was the result of a welding accident. Other stories that also went viral were those of warnings by embassies to their staff right before the explosion.

Covid-19

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of the Lebanese media and imposed many challenges in dealing with fake news and misleading content. The media could not curb rumors and disinformation narratives about the origin of the virus, its transmission, and prevention methods. On the contrary, it contributed to the circulation of misinformation around the virus. The pandemic highlighted the weak nature of ethical boundaries and value systems that guide the media work and journalism in Lebanon. Does "everything go," if it serves a political agenda or a boost in advertisement?

14   Fake News and Social Stability, UNDP, Dawaer Foundation and UKaid, 2021. Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/lb/Fake-News-and--Social-Stability.pdf

15   Caroline Hayek, Several municipalities tighten restrictions on Syrian refugees, L'Orient Today, 14 August 2022. Available at: https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1308497/several-municipalities-tighten-their-restrictions-on-syrian-refugees.html

16   Fake News and Social Stability, UNDP, Dawaer Foundation and UKaid, 2021. Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/lb/Fake-News-and--Social-Stability.pdf

The first detected case of Covid-19 was a woman who traveled from Iran to Lebanon. Former Lebanese Health Minister Hamad Hassan reassured that the situation was under control. This proved extremely wrong in the days that followed. However, the interesting part is that this immediately took a political turn towards a confrontation between pro-west and pro-Iran narratives. Two narratives were picked up by the media, politicized, polarized, and disseminated.

Several narratives around alternative treatments were trending, starting with herbal remedies, saints' relics, garlic, tea, and the Lebanese staple alcoholic beverage, arak. When the vaccination campaign started, it was also met with a wave of misleading narratives focusing on the negative effects that vaccines have on the human body.

In one example, MTV television channel published a report indicating that pets can transmit Covid-19 to humans. This caused a wave of pet abandonment and the poisoning of stray cats and dogs. MTV later removed the report from its website and published a new report contradicting the original one, in line with World Health Organization (WHO) statements on the topic.

In another example LBCI News tweeted that a solution to the Covid-19 pandemic might not be within reach at all, quoting the WHO, whose statement actually said that several vaccines were in phase-3 clinical trials, and was no immediate solution, at the time.

The Assassination of Writer and Activist Lokman Slim

Lebanese writer, political analyst, and activist Lokman Slim was found dead in his car in South Lebanon on February 4, 2021. He was shot six times, including five times in the head. Two years later, the case is still open and no indictments have been made, as is the case with all political assassinations in Lebanon. Slim is an outspoken Shiite opponent of Hezbollah. His positions on Hezbollah, Iran, and the Syrian regime made him a victim of hate speech and disinformation. He was often threatened and accused of treason and collaboration with Israel by Hezbollah's supporters.[17]

On the same day of his assassination, Jawad Nasrallah, the son of Hezbollah's Security General Hassan Nasrallah tweeted: "The loss of some people is in fact a win and a grace that wasn't expected #no_regrets." Slim's assassination was celebrated by a significant segment of society, including journalists such as Ali Mortada. A study for SKF by Nasri Messarra on the social media hate networks surrounding Slim's assassination concluded that a well-connected network of accounts was used to conduct a campaign against Slim on Twitter. Some of the accounts used in the campaign were suspended soon after his assassination.[18]

17 Marie Jo Sader, How Lokman Slim was assassinated, L'Orient Today, 3 February 2022. Available at: https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1289706/how-lokman-slim-was-assassinated.html

18 Nasri Messarra, A Social Media Analysis of the Hate Network Surrounding Lokman Slim's Assassination, SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, 30 September 2021. Available at: https://www.skeyesmedia.org/documents/bo_filemanager/LS-Social-Media-Hate-Network-Analysis-20210927.pdf

Rai Al-Yom published an article entitled "The Assassination of Lokman Slim: The Conspiracy from Outside and the Implementation from Inside Targeting the Weapons of the Resistance" written by a certain Fatima Al-Jubouri, referred to as an Iraqi writer and researcher, on February 7, 2021. The article was shared on several websites, including Iraqi websites. Investigation conducted by fact-checking YouTube channel *Adwa2* (with the support of Eurasia Foundation, Media Diversity Institute, and SKF) revealed that all Fatima Al-Jubouri's social media accounts were created in January 2021, ten days before the assassination of Lokman Slim. The investigation linked Al-Jubouri's picture to a Lebanese citizen from Southern Lebanon working in the beauty industry, who discovered that her pictures were being used by a fake account. Further investigation into Al-Jubouri was included in a report by Facebook in February 2021, entitled "Coordinated Irregular Behavior on Behalf of a Government Entity." Facebook announced that it suspended 27 Facebook and Instagram accounts that were created in Iran and targeting Lebanon, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. Fatima Al-Jubouri's account was among these accounts.[19]

The Economic Crisis

Lebanon's economic crisis that erupted in 2019 and shook the country's fragile but lasting social and political status quo, was rife with mis- and disinformation. The crisis that continues to threaten billions of dollars in deposits put the local currency in free fall mode against the US dollar, signaling the beginning of an era of rapidly increasing inflation. An already panic-stricken population was subjected to different forms of misleading information, disseminated through different digital and traditional communication avenues. From WhatsApp messages and voice notes to prime-time talk shows, the Lebanese public was bombarded with misinformation.

Right after the onset of the financial crisis, Lebanon witnessed a mushrooming of experts and economic analysts, crowding the prime-time talk shows and news bulletins on TV, radio, and online news websites and blogs. Tens, if not hundreds of self-proclaimed analysts, many of whom lack credibility and/or experience, made weekly or daily contributions to the economic debate through traditional media spaces and newly established blogs. A myriad of explanations, theories, and seemingly in-depth analyses were broadcasted to puzzled audiences across the nation. The media bears a significant part of the responsibility for promoting misleading narratives, contributing to misinformation, and increasing the ambiguity of the financial situation, instead of producing a solid and coherent journalistic effort to answer the big questions about the fast and sudden, although not unexpected, collapse of the country's economy and long-term monetary stability. Over time, misleading narratives became too difficult to discredit, backed by an army of newfound economists, and a wealth of welcoming media space.

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19   Check Your Facts: Who is Fatima Al-Jubouri?, Adwa2, 14 April 2021. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smCs248BHW4

One example is how Lebanese political analyst Johnny Mounayer stated, on February 23, 2020, that based on sources close to the US Treasury, The Washington Post declared that USD 800 billion were lost due to corruption in Lebanon. It turned out that the same news was picked up earlier by journalists and media outlets in the aftermath of the October 17 uprising and attributed to *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The origin of the news was related to a grant to fund schools and attributed to the United States. Mounayer's claim was picked up and recycled by journalists and news websites.
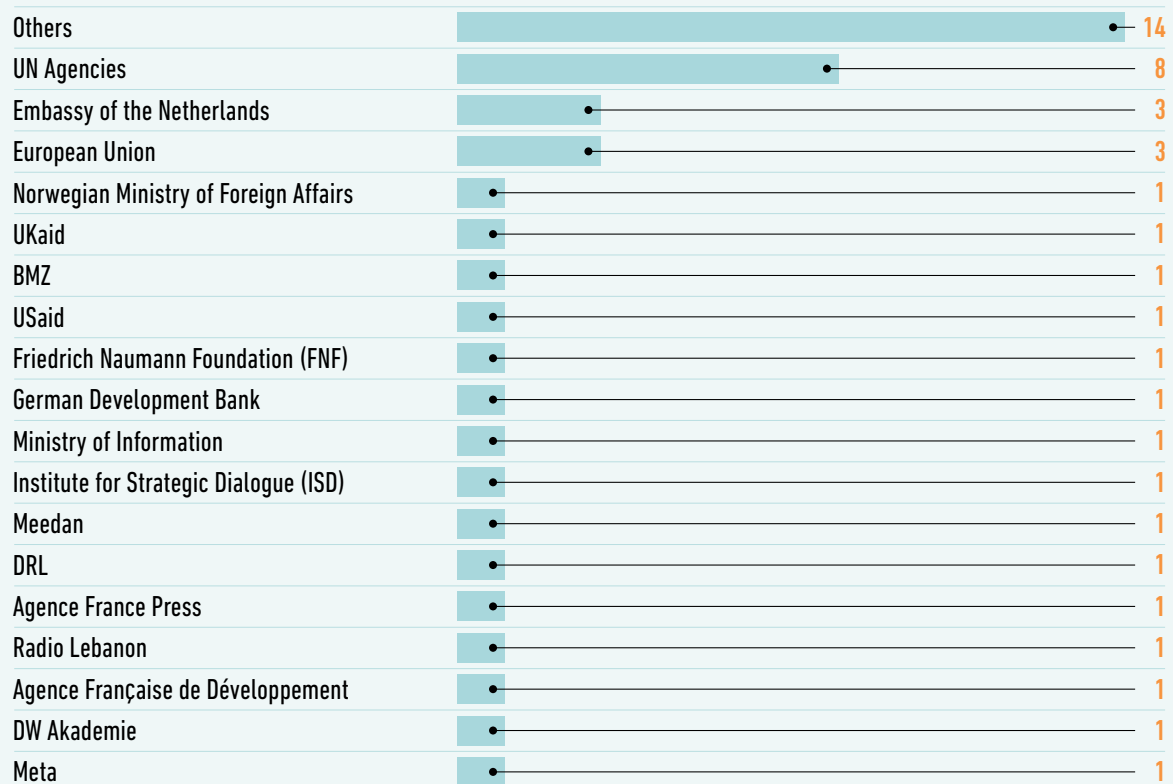
The scarcity of basic goods and materials amid the economic crisis made the spread of false news easier to go viral. Many unconfirmed videos and images of oil smuggling from Lebanon to Syria went viral on social media platforms and they were shared by politicians and journalists, receiving hundreds of likes, interactions, shares, and retweets. On the other hand, the efforts by fact-checkers to verify and correct the news did not receive the same amount of exposure and interest.[20]

20   Fake News and Social Stability, UNDP, Dawaer Foundation and UKaid, 2021. Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/lb/Fake-News-and--Social-Stability.pdf

VI. Findings and Analysis

The organization and donor mapping conducted by NDI and SKF focused on projects implemented from 2019 to 2022, which focused on addressing issues related to the information environment. During this period, 43 disinformation-related programs and initiatives were identified and documented. As *Figure 1* shows, 18 different donors funded disinformation-related projects in Lebanon; the research was nevertheless unable to detect the donors behind 14 of the projects in Lebanon due to the lack of relevant online information. Some organizations when contacted declined to provide additional details on their programs, such as the donors, budget, and time period.

Figure 1. Projects Per Donor

Donor	Projects
Others	14
UN Agencies	8
Embassy of the Netherlands	3
European Union	3
Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs	1
UKaid	1
BMZ	1
USaid	1
Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF)	1
German Development Bank	1
Ministry of Information	1
Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)	1
Meedan	1
DRL	1
Agence France Press	1
Radio Lebanon	1
Agence Française de Développement	1
DW Akademie	1
Meta	1

UN agencies, the Embassy of the Netherlands, and the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon are the top donors on the topic. UN agencies in Lebanon funded eight programs in total, six were funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), two by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO), and one by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (*Figure 2*). The UNESCO Beirut office, the Syrian Ministry of Information, and the National Commission for UNESCO organized a webinar for 47 Syrian journalists to introduce the Arabic version of UNESCO's handbook called "Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training." The Lebanese Ministry of Information implemented two projects with funding from UN agencies. The first project was implemented in 2021 and funded by UNDP and UNICEF. It focused on equipping journalists with the needed skills, knowledge, and tools during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to contribute to the development of the media sector. During the implementation of the second project in 2022, the Ministry of Information produced and shared animated videos on social media under the title *Sa7e7 El Maaloumah* (Correct the news) to combat rumors by providing accurate, neutral, and trusted information to the public.
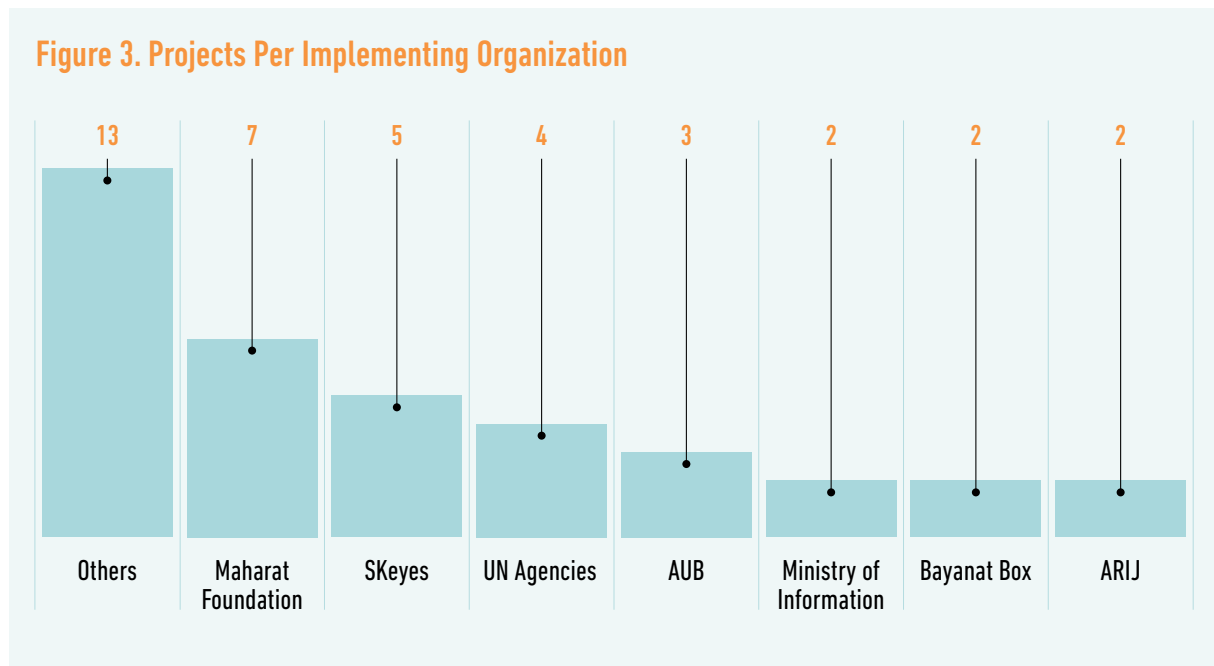
Figure 2. Projects Per UN Agency
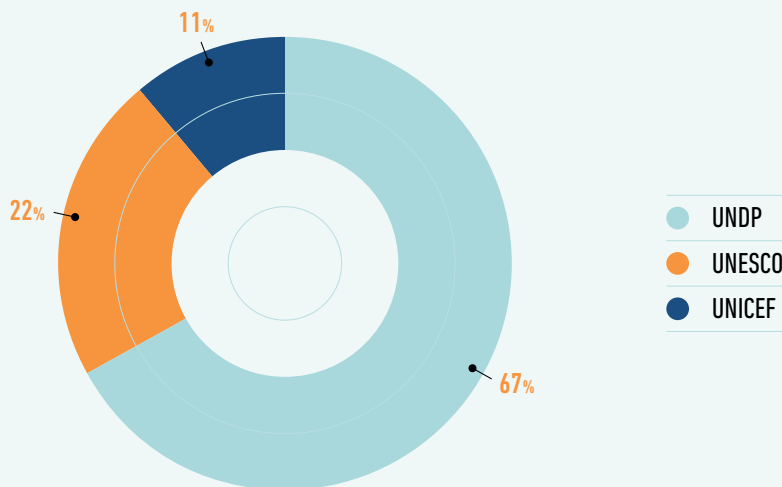
The Embassy of the Netherlands in Lebanon funded three projects. The budget for the first program was USD 69,650 for three years. From 2021 to 2023, SKF is carrying out public opinion research on the issue of freedom of expression, aiming to understand the extent to which the public is able to differentiate between facts and fake news, and the extent to which citizens are inclined to share fake news on social media platforms. In partnership with UNESCO and the Embassy of the Netherlands, the May Chidiac Foundation produced 12 social media episodes on hate speech and mis/disinformation to raise awareness on the issue and trained 15 youngsters to combat disinformation. In the run-up to the general election of 2022, the Maharat Foundation partnered

with the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) to highlight the main disinformation narratives in the context of the parliamentary elections through television and social media monitoring.

In 2021, the European Union dedicated between USD 1,166,680 and USD 1,944,702 to increase the use of locally driven, fact-checked online news media by the public as well as policymakers. Siren Associates partnered with the Arab Fact Checkers Network (AFCN) managed by Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), and Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA) for the implementation of the project, with each partner contributing based on its field of expertise. In 2022, the EU Delegation produced videos in Arabic and English that were shared on its social media platforms to raise the public's awareness about disinformation. Also, with the support of the EU Delegation, SKF created an interactive manga graphic novel as a curriculum for teenage students that includes the best practices to detect and debunk disinformation. The manga was introduced to five schools in 2022, and SKF plans to present the curriculum to additional schools next year.

One of the identified projects tackled issues related to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. USAID funded a project with Rooted in Trust and the Maharat Foundation for a period of two years, aiming at countering the spread of Covid-19 rumors among Syrian refugees. Health actors established an open-source database where Covid-19 rumors could be tracked.

Figure 3. Projects Per Implementing Organization

Others	Maharat Foundation	SKeyes	UN Agencies	AUB	Ministry of Information	Bayanat Box	ARIJ
13	7	5	4	3	2	2	2

As demonstrated in *Figure 3*, the Maharat Foundation, SKF, and UN agencies are the lead organizations working on disinformation-related issues in Lebanon, with a total of 16 projects. The Maharat Foundation implemented seven projects, focusing on the major political events in Lebanon. Two projects aimed at countering disinformation in the context of the Lebanese parliamentary election of May 15, 2022, and one project focused on documenting fake news in relevance to the events of October 17 uprising during 2019 and 2020. Another project by the Maharat Foundation aimed at building a professional journalistic fact-checking community.

SKF partnered with Meedan under the NAWA Investigative Fund in which 30 university students from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Yemen were trained to monitor, verify, and analyze mis/disinformation around the Covid-19 pandemic. At the end of the project, SKF provided mentorship to the students who drafted a report entitled Disinformation during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Under the US State Department-funded and Eurasia Foundation-led program *Adwa2*, SKF equipped 60 journalists from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq with tools and techniques to understand the motivations, strategies, and tactics behind disinformation efforts. In addition to the training sessions and webinars, SKF translated materials that were inaccessible to Arabic-speaking journalists and created the Adwa2.org website to curate the best practices in the field of disinformation debunking and fact-checking in the Arabic language.

UNDP and UNESCO implemented two projects each (*Figure 4*), aspiring to raise awareness on fake news and the impact it has on social stability and to provide the Lebanese public with evidence-based research impact it has on social stability.

As *Figure 3* shows, universities such as the American University in Beirut (AUB) and the Saint-Joseph University (USJ), in addition to the Ministry of Information, the EU Delegation to Lebanon, and eight organizations, including Bayanat Box, ARIJ, Dawaer Foundation, and Siren Analytics, to name a few, also implemented 16 projects. Annahar news website, LBCI, and Al-Jadeed TV channels, and Voice of Lebanon radio station implemented one project each. Journalist and fact checker Mahmoud Ghazayel created an online platform in which he debunks fake news and disinformation narratives promoted in the region based on the news pieces he receives from the public.

Figure 5 represents the number of projects that each organization was directly or indirectly involved in. UN agencies, SKF, and the Maharat Foundation were also involved in two projects each by sharing their expertise and providing assistance to the implementing partners.
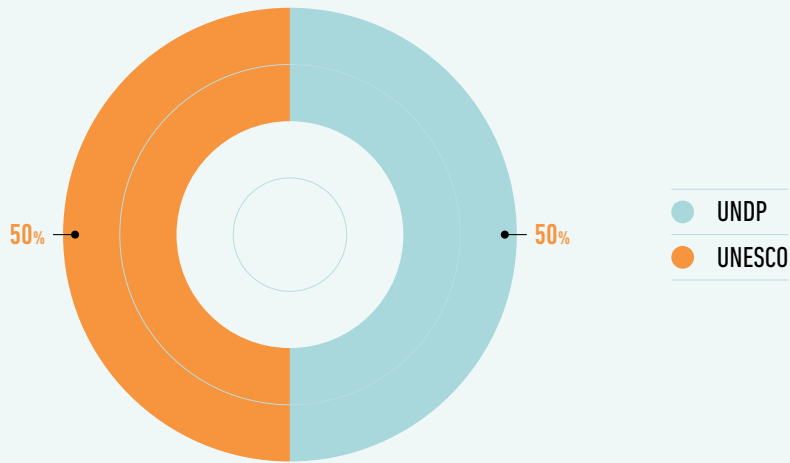
Figure 4. Projects Per UN Agency

50%   50%

- UNDP
- UNESCO

Figure 5. Projects Per Partner Organization

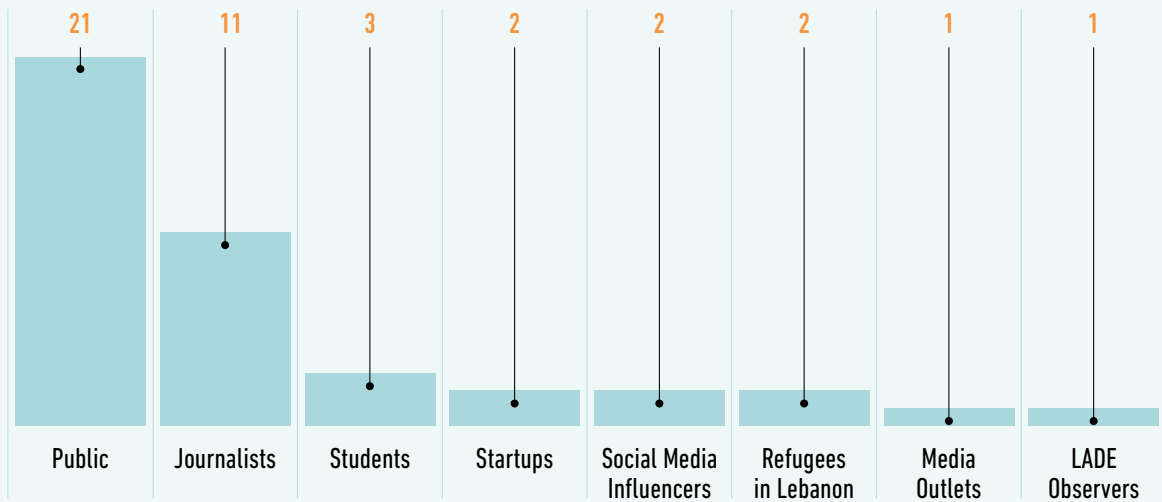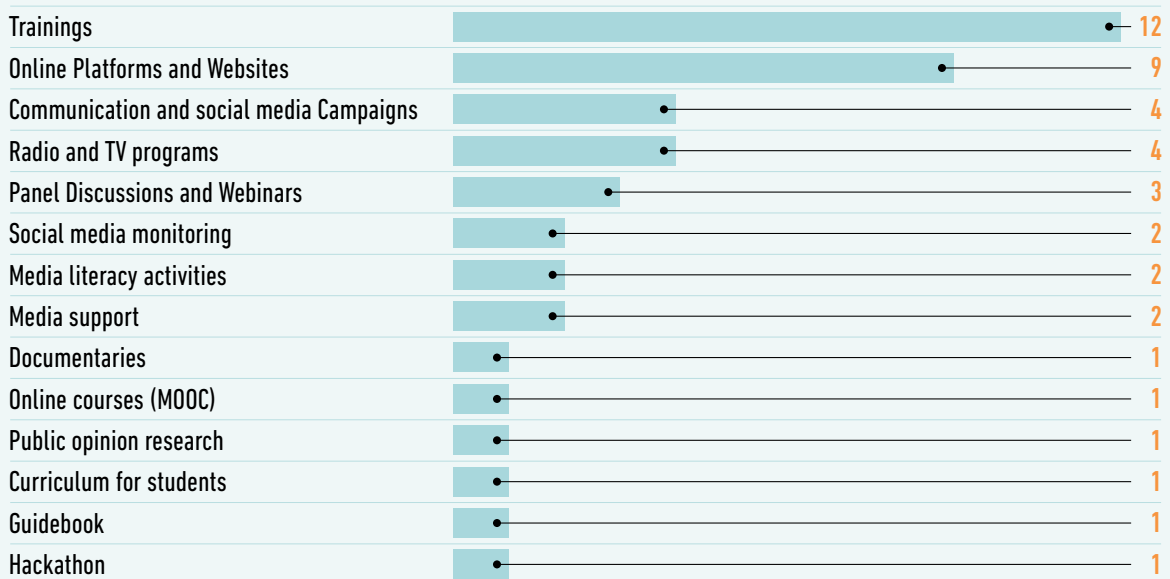| Organization	Projects
UN Agencies	2
SKeyes	2
Maharat Foundation	2
WHO	1
Dawaer Foundation	1
Huloul	1
May Chidiac Foundation	1
LADE	1
IEEE Lebanon	1
MSFEA	1
Newseum	1
SMEX	1
CFI	1
Eurasia Foundation	1
Navanti	1
MDI	1
Syria's Ministry of Information	1
Jordan Open Source Association	1
International Center for Journalists	1

Figure 6. Projects Per Beneficiary

Public	Journalists	Students	Startups	Social Media Influencers	Refugees in Lebanon	Media Outlets	LADE Observers
21	11	3	2	2	2	1	1

Figure 7. Types of Projects

Type	Count
Trainings	12
Online Platforms and Websites	9
Communication and social media Campaigns	4
Radio and TV programs	4
Panel Discussions and Webinars	3
Social media monitoring	2
Media literacy activities	2
Media support	2
Documentaries	1
Online courses (MOOC)	1
Public opinion research	1
Curriculum for students	1
Guidebook	1
Hackathon	1

Figure 6 reveals that 50% (21) of the total implemented projects in Lebanon targeted the public, with the objective of raising awareness around disinformation and the way fake news influences media consumption. As demonstrated in *Figure 7*, four projects aimed at highlighting the problem through communication materials and social media campaigns. At the same time, radio stations and television channels broadcasted four different programs to shed light on disinformation and the significance of checking the accuracy of news and information circulating in the country. The Maharat Foundation executed one project on media literacy with activists, university students, and

journalists. A total of 12 projects (25%) focused on providing training for journalists and youngsters (*Figure 7*). In 11 projects, as *Figure 6* shows, journalists were trained on fact-checking, verification of information, and countering the promotion of false narratives and on the use of relevant techniques and tools in their investigations. Three activities (7%) revolved around training the youth on fact-checking and educating them on the repercussions of promoting false information.

From 2019 to 2022, at least nine online fact-checking platforms and websites emerged in Lebanon.[21] In order to analyze fake news and provide the public with reliable and objective information, Deutsche Welle Akademie funded the Fact-o-meter initiative, which appears on the Maharat Foundation's website. The Ministry of Information and the National News Agency created the Factcheck Lebanon website. It is accessible to the public to verify the accuracy of doubtful and suspicious news. Furthermore, Bayanat Box organized a hackathon in 2019 for startups to create prototypes for innovative digital solutions to detect and raise awareness of fake news in the digital space.

Figure 8. Number of Projects Per Year
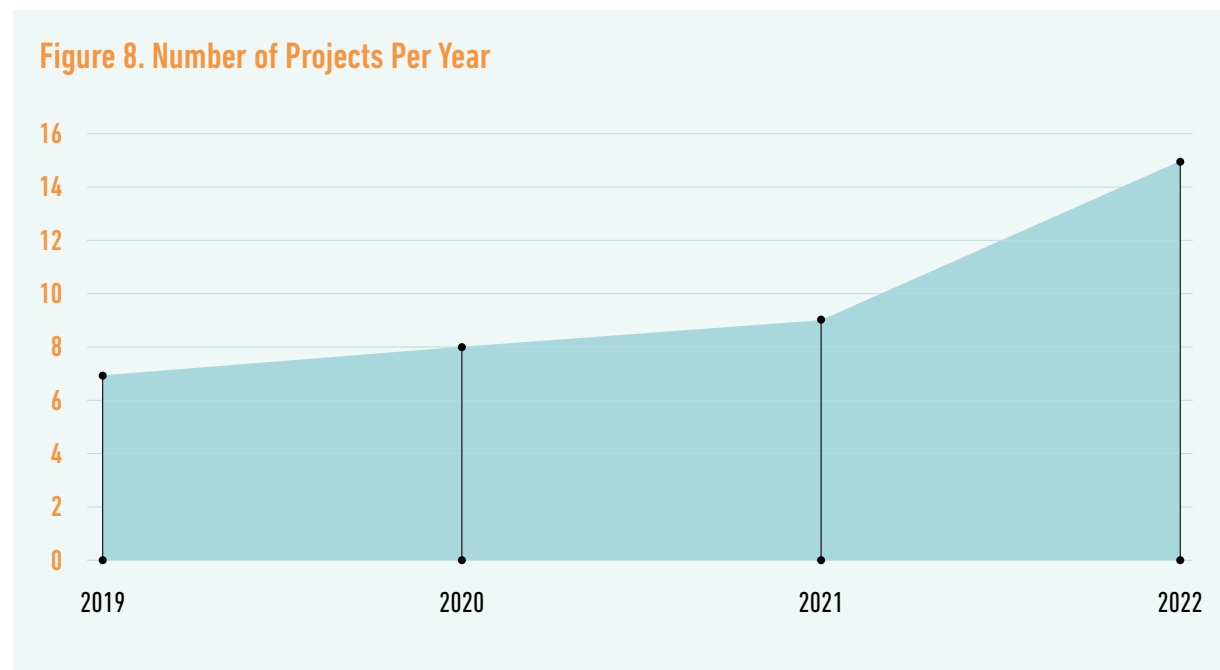
As shown in *Figure 8*, disinformation programs in Lebanon witnessed a steady increase between 2019 and 2022. From seven projects in 2019 to fifteen in 2022, this surge is indicative of a global awakening to the dangers that dis- and misinformation pose for development, social and political stability, and conflict resolution. In addition to donors' increased interest in disinformation, several factors account for the increased interest in Lebanon and the region. The major political shocks that started with and followed

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21 Websites including Fake News: University Library Guides, Factcheck Lebanon, Adwa2, AFP Fact-checking Platform, Annahar Tatahaqaq, Journalist Mahmoud Ghazayel's initiative to fact-check news, Tahaqaq, Fact-o-meter.

the Arab Spring worsened human rights conditions in the region and led to a shrinking space for freedom of expression. Lebanon's ranking in Reporters without Borders's 2022 world press freedom report dropped to 130 out of 180 countries. SKF documented 801 violations against media and cultural freedom during President Michel Aoun's term, from 2016 to 2020, 234 of which during the first three months of the October 17, 2019 uprising. In Lebanon, the need for fact-based narratives became too strong to ignore, given the affiliations of local media outlets, their complicity in perpetuating political and economic misinformation narratives, and the lack of responsibility in covering social issues including public health.

Due to the restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the implementation of 58% of the projects between 2019 and 2022 was carried out online (as shown below in *Figure 9*); 24% of the projects were conducted offline, and 9% of the programs were executed both online and in person; 5% were radio programs and 4% were television programs.

Figure 9. Location of Implementation

Legend:
- Online
- In-Person
- Online and In-Person
- Radio
- TV
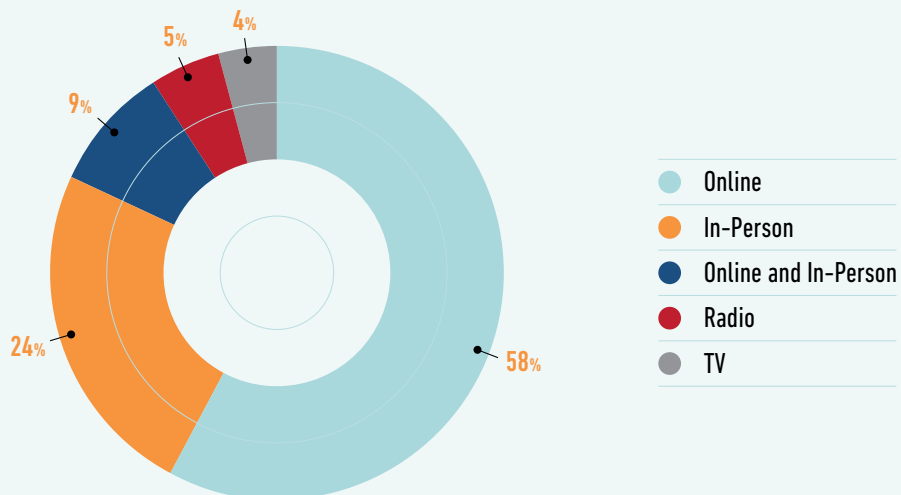
VII. Analysis and Recommendations

In this section the report attempts to assess the effectiveness of disinformation-focused projects that were implemented in the last three years. The research identifies what the responsibilities of the different stakeholders are in the battle against disinformation, including that of donors, media outlets and journalists, social media platforms, and civil society organizations.

Donors

Additional resources are required to achieve mid- and long-term results. Project design processes must account for longer timeframes and for a wider range of audiences. Indeed, disinformation affects audiences of all demographics. Programming must account for that, and for different audience profiles in the project design process

Fact-checkers play a significant role in exposing mis- and disinformation. Donors have the responsibility of promoting this role and directing partners and grantees to use fact-checkers as resources, instead of a siloed approach among their different programs.

Networking and knowledge-exchange opportunities can enhance the capacities, tools, and methodologies available to journalists and fact-checkers. Bringing civil society actors and academics together with journalists and fact-checkers can substantially improve the work against disinformation and would enrich the debate around it.

Also, all interventions must respect the do-no-harm principle. With the exception of a few efforts to provide safe housing for victims of gender-based violence, and SKF's safe house service for at-risk journalists, the practice of providing shelter is not common in Lebanon, and there is a high disproportionality between the high level of risk involved in investigative journalism and reporting and the availability of safe spaces in the country. More investment in this service is essential to ensure that dedicated journalists and fact-checkers are not left to their fate when intimidation by state or non-state actors reaches life-threatening levels.

Most importantly, it is essential for donors to exchange information about the type and scope of their interventions they implement in Lebanon, for better targeting of resources and enhanced synergy of programming. Coordination also encourages the sharing of lessons learned.

Media Outlets and Journalists

Media outlets in Lebanon struggle with credibility, partly due to their political affiliations, and partly due to the frequent shortcomings in fact-checking. Their contribution to the battle against dis- and misinformation can in turn contribute to restoring their reputation and will help them reestablish their audience's trust. Connecting their audience with fact-checkers, instating policies against the promotion of misleading narratives, and establishing fact-checking protocols, are some of the ways by which these outlets can make a substantive contribution. While acknowledging the political and financial challenges against this, given the outlets' affiliations, there is room to enhance the quality of news reporting and coverage by focusing on individual, dedicated journalists, and by encouraging the certification of media organizations by audited processes such as the Journalism Trust Initiative.

Social Media Platforms

The leading social media platforms must revise and amend their policies, to narrow the gaps between their global safeguards and the local contexts. A focused dialogue with relevant advocacy organizations can inform the platforms' efforts to improve and localize their algorithms and content moderation procedures.

There are several steps that require collaboration between social media companies and CSOs: a) creating a trusted network of experts and collaborators, based on clear criteria and continuous capacity building; b) facilitating the validation of online information; and c) increasing the transparency and explainability of flagged misinformative content.[22]

Also, social media companies should translate their stated commitment to combating mis- and disinformation and supporting networks of fact-checkers by reducing the technical and financial obstacles that the latter face when debunking false information. For example, fact checkers could be given incentives for boosting content that counter disinformation and misinformation, reducing their cost, and allowing them to increase the reach of their corrective content, especially when disinformation is often backed by resourceful parties and therefore reaches a large audience through generous boosting.

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22   Combating misinformation online: re-imagining social media for policy-making, Kyza et al, Internet Policy Review, Journal on internet regulation, available at: https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/combatingmisinformation-online-re-imagining-social-media-policy-making

Civil Society Organizations

Advocacy CSOs, especially those that work on the rights of marginalized communities, have a stake in transforming the media landscape to become more reflective of their policy agendas, and a greater stake in establishing long lasting partnerships with media outlets that benefit both parties. This will require imagining an innovative model of collaboration whereby the thematic knowledge accumulated by CSOs becomes a reference point for partner outlets to use in their fact checking processes and their coverage of relevant news and events.

The competition between media outlets and the lack of pre-emptive news verification practices and protocols leave the citizens, consumers of media products, to become easy prey for disinformation and misleading narratives. In this case, it becomes the citizens' responsibility to put their efforts into verifying news before sharing it. For this reason, it is essential to nurture media literacy within societies. Although tools and techniques to counter disinformation are openly available for ordinary citizens and journalists, the absence of media literacy remains one of the reasons for the lack of interest in the truth and news verification. Fake and misleading news is more appealing to the public as they mirror the emotions and fear in the citizens' everyday lives.

Even though Lebanon introduced media to the civil education program in schools, the curriculum that dates back to 1997 does not reflect the change and development of the media sphere and landscape throughout the years. In addition to modernizing the curriculum, the importance of enhancing media literacy in curbing the spread and impact of disinformation warrants further investment in youth- and seniors-centered projects that address the notions of mis- and disinformation, in addition to other elements of propaganda.

CSOs have a responsibility to continue their efforts in countering disinformation by documenting and analyzing disinformation narratives and tracking the origin and purpose behind the harmful discourse that is being promoted. Organizations must collaborate and share the lessons learned and challenges from previously implemented projects.

Although training journalists on fact-checking is important to curb the spread of fake news, it is not enough unless fact-checking becomes a core value that is embedded in their daily work. Based on the expertise SKF and Maharat Foundation have built in this field, introducing journalists to the latest tools and technologies does not produce the desired results unless journalists are willing to receive long-term mentorship. This can be achieved by training them on specific themes related to the issues and events in the country. For example, the Maharat Foundation trained journalists from traditional and alternative media outlets on monitoring discourses and narratives during the

parliamentary elections and provided them with mentorship to debunk and publish content on their platforms and Maharat's Fact-o-meter website in order to reach a wider audience.

In the fight against disinformation, it is crucial to empower investigative journalists. The role of CSOs, in this case, is to create a safe space for journalists and forensic data analysts to share their accomplishments and challenges and open new opportunities for collaboration between them. It would facilitate exchanging expertise and access to information and documents related to cases under investigation, especially when investigative journalists are working in a dangerous environment and could be under threat by their own government or other political actors. CSOs must equip media organizations and individual journalists working under oppressive regimes with tools and funds to operate safely and effectively.