4 Communications and media for a more open government in Lebanon

This chapter will focus on the role of communication and the broader media ecosystem to support the implementation of the open government agenda in Lebanon. It will look at how public entities in charge of these reforms can use communication, and how they can support a more resilient media ecosystem that serves the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation.

How public communication and media ecosystems contribute to the principles of Open Government

Public communication can both be leveraged to make the policy cycle more transparent, accountable and participative, and as a promotion tool to support the introduction of specific open government reforms both internally and externally. For its part, an active and well-functioning media and information ecosystem plays an important enabling role in holding officials accountable and providing essential information for citizen participation in public policy.

In the past, traditional media, whether in print, broadcast, and now increasingly online, has been the primary vehicle via which public institutions could communicate with the public at large. Citizens would learn about government action and the policies that concerned them through the news media, which also captured public debates and sentiments on these topics.

With the rise of digital platforms, public institutions have themselves become key actors in this ecosystem, as direct providers of policy information through their websites and social media handles. These innovations conversely allow citizens to interact directly with the institutions and can lead to the development of a more direct two-way dialogue. These changes have also brought about a complex ecosystem where established sources of policy information, namely traditional media and the government, are complemented by the many voices of individual stakeholders (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[1]).

In the public policy process more broadly, media and information ecosystems can function as a privileged arena for debate and critique of public policies, whereby different stakeholders can express their views in a public way. Illustrating this function, Penteado and Fortunato (2015[2]) have developed a framework through which they seek to illustrate the influence the media can exert on public policy throughout a six-stage cycle (Figure 4.1).

First, media can help to set public policy agenda and bring to bear pressure on public policy agents on issues with greater popular appeal and salience. Subsequent in the cycle, media can help to identify, evaluate, and select policy options, giving space to dispute alternatives via its channels, foster debate in an open and transparent manner, and allow interest groups to indicate their choices within the presented policy options. Finally, media can play a crucial role in implementing policies and monitoring their effects, including providing coverage of the positive and negative impacts of implemented policies and disseminating their findings to a larger audience.

Besides their broader role in the policy-making context, public communication and media ecosystems can specifically support the principles of Open Government, namely transparency, accountability, integrity, and stakeholder participation and contribute to the implementation of the *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (OECD, 2017[3]), as demonstrated below.

Figure 4.1. Media and the Public Policy Cycle
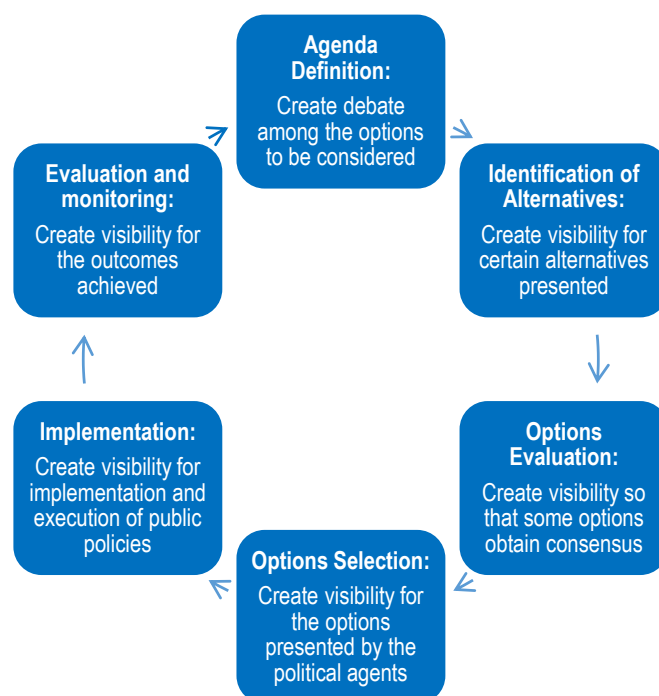
Transparency

Empirical research and evidence has come to validate the hypothesis that public communication and a strong media ecosystem support improved transparency, including vital information on government policies and performance.[1] A strong media ecosystem, on its own, can improve the quality of information that citizens have access to. However, as discussed above, governments themselves are agents in this ecosystem and can increase transparency about their actions by communicating with them directly and through the media. Public communication, as supported by the proper strategies, plans, policies, co-ordination structures, and resources, can support transparency in a variety of manners.

At a basic level, it can simply be a vehicle for the disclosure of official information, statements from officials, and provide a regular record of government and institutions' actions. When it is carried out through more sophisticated means and in a more comprehensive way, public communication can enhance transparency by not only disseminating information, but by packaging it in formats and with language that resonates better with specific audiences, as discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, transparency can be increased by using a variety of channels that ensure official information and messages are delivered more effectively to audiences. In this sense, complex and technical policy debates, as could be science or finance-related reforms, can be made more readily accessible to a wider audience, demystified, and presented in an intelligible way that clarifies the implications for citizens.

Public communication can similarly amplify the transparency outcomes of other open government policies. For instance, it can promote the contents of proactive disclosures under ATI laws, and raise awareness of how and what information can be requested through this process. Likewise, institutions can use Open Government Data to support their communication and promote its use by journalists and other stakeholders.

On their part, the media and civil society, can be primary interlocutors with this type of content, and become key consumers of such open government policies by filing ATI requests and analysing Open Data, and in turn, publicising the related information to contribute to and engage in the policy discourse. Throughout the implementation process, the media can help evaluating and sharing the impact of public transparency initiatives—including reporting on rates of responsiveness and rejections of such requests.

Supporting transparency depends not only on the existence of related policies and their communication to external stakeholders. It also depends on a culture of transparency within the public sector and a civil service that is aware and prepared to support the policies and initiatives introduced by the government. In this respect, internal communication is a key tool to instil such a culture across institutions and to ensure officials are well informed about their obligations under ATI or Open Data provisions, and prepared to facilitate the transparent flow of government information.

Accountability

The media has a significant role in supporting principal-agent accountability relationships between public entities and stakeholders. By reducing information asymmetries, the media provides citizens (as principals) with the necessary visibility to reward or sanction public and elected officials (their agents).

Alongside a strong media ecosystem, public communication can reinforce accountability mechanisms, processes, and institutions. By just publicly disseminating records of the government's actions, decisions, and statements to citizens, this function offers a track record for the media and other stakeholders to scrutinise and against which citizens can hold officials accountable. By communicating proactively, institutions can also develop a constructive narrative on accountability that notes, for example, the constraints they operate under and justifies their performance to stakeholders.

Public communication can more specifically support the work of formal and informal accountability institutions. It can for instance raise citizens' awareness about oversight and control agencies common in many OECD countries, such as Ombudsman's offices, Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), Grievance Redress Mechanisms (GRMs), as well as social accountability mechanisms like citizen report cards, social audits, participatory budgeting, etc.

Similarly, the media can play a direct role in maintaining scrutiny by amplifying the work of accountability institutions. This includes following and reporting on the findings of SAIs, legislative oversight committees, and Ombudsman's offices on issues of public importance.

Integrity

Similarly to the relationship with accountability described above, a strong media ecosystem supports public integrity. It has a key role in exposing corruption and reinforcing integrity values. It can amplify the voices of whistleblowers and exert pressure for the introduction of relevant reforms. The media has can also report on the implementation of such measures and give citizens and stakeholders the information to hold those responsible to account as per the above process.

For its part, public communication, in line with the *Recommendation of the Council on Public Integrity* (OECD, 2017[5]) can help foster a whole-of-society culture of integrity. First, from an internal perspective, it can ensure that core integrity rules, standards, and values are effectively communicated throughout the public sector, including those related to conflicts of interest, whistleblower protections, deontological value statements, and codes of conduct.

Likewise, internal communication informed by behavioural insights can be used to nudge desired attitudes among public officials, including on actions to take when faced with undue influence in policy making, lobbying, policy capture and to manage risks in contexts related to finance or public procurement. The

same values and desired behaviours can be reiterated to external audiences through messaging that extends the same expectations towards the private sector or civil society.

Stakeholder participation

A key role of the media, just as for public communication, is to frame issues in a relevant way for citizens as to increase their interest and engagement with policy issues that concern them. As the common intermediaries between institutions on one hand, and citizens, media and civil society on the other, public communicators are central to the participation of these stakeholders in the policy cycle.

By establishing a two-way dialogue with stakeholders, whether through the new opportunities for interaction awarded by social media or through more traditional face-to-face meetings and events, governments can allow for citizens to voice views and react to content in a way that can inform policy and improve services. The communication function similarly relies on public feedback gathered via opinion polls, sentiment analysis of public channels, and other audience insights. As such, this "listening" activity can translate into a form of participation when it serves to shape responses and inform policy and service design and delivery.

Public communication is equally important when it comes to broadening the reach and appeal of participatory processes conducted as part of open government initiatives and beyond. An effective use of competencies like campaigns can serve to, inter alia: (i) inform the public about the existence of participatory mechanisms and platforms, (ii) mobilise a wider range of stakeholders to partake in consultations, and innovative citizen participation practices; (iii) provide stakeholders with the necessary information to contribute to public decisions; (iv) establish sanctioned fora for the public (e.g. CSO, citizens, private sector) to express their preferences to policy makers; and (v) provide information on how public consultations were recorded and followed-up on. When based on audience insights, communications can also be tailored to reach different and vulnerable segments of the population – including marginalised and under-represented groups – to broaden participation beyond those groups traditionally in possession of access and influence.

As a culture of governance that brings government closer to citizens, open government involves an internal change of culture that actively seeks to create opportunities for participation and involve stakeholders in public action. Internal communication can support this objective, by sensitising officials at all levels to laws and directives about stakeholder consultation and engagement. It can additionally ensure that the proper guidelines, standards, and procedures are disseminated to public officials in conducting these processes and that their results are relayed to the interested parties.

In parallel, the media can facilitate stakeholder participation by serving as a vehicle and barometer for public opinion and by amplifying opportunities for participation. First, it can provide information and publicise existing participation opportunities, as well as invite engagement and debate about other policy processes. In this regard, the media can help to present the public with different options, highlight the merits of each, and provide recommendations.

Similarly, the media can play a watchdog role whereby it can shine a spotlight on government decisions and processes that did not properly follow participation guidelines or allow adequate time for comment. Finally, the media can monitor and evaluate the impact of participatory processes, including reporting on how consultations were eventually incorporated into new laws and policies.

Communicating on open government reforms

Having looked at how public communication and media ecosystems can support individual principles of open government, it is worth highlighting the value they can have in supporting specific policies. First, external outreach can help with sensitisation efforts for citizens and other relevant public stakeholders so that they can better understand why the open government agenda is established and what it will deliver.

Citizens who are more aware of such initiatives, and who understand them better are more likely to participate in such efforts. More broadly, sensitisation efforts and campaigns can be held to encourage a larger cultural change in favour of open government principles.

The second function of external public communication is that it can support knowledge sharing and raise awareness among citizens of the role that they can play in supporting open government initiatives and the opportunities available to engage in public life. To this end, the OECD and OGP have developed a how-to guide on implementing and communicating related reforms (Box 4.1).

Box 4.1. Communicating open government How-to Guide and the example of Morocco

The OECD and OGP published a how-to guide to help steer public officials and communication officers in implementing open government initiatives and strategies within institutions.

The guide recommends steps for developing a communications plan in support of open government principles. These include a thorough pre-assessment, setting clear objectives and responsibilities, monitoring and evaluating progress, identifying audiences and developing key messages.

Communication tools are also elaborated to guide through various aspects of content development and communication channels, ranging from case studies and marketing elements, to press kits and social media content.

The guide emphasises the importance of stakeholder participation for better and more effective communication. Beyond governmental actors and multi-stakeholder committees, external partnerships with civil society organisations or youth associations are strongly encouraged.

As an example, within the framework of the OGP National Action Plan, Morocco's Ministry of Administration Reform and Civil Service (MRAFP) developed a communication plan to raise public awareness about Access To Information. The main elements of their campaign included producing informative content in several languages, and disseminating it via multiple channels as to maximise audience reach. Ultimately, the goal was to popularise the understanding and effective use of ATI both internally to the government and externally, and to ensure responsiveness from public officials to proactive requests for information filed by citizens.

Source: OECD (2020[6]), *Open Government Scan of Lebanon*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7cce8c0-en; Open Government Partnership (2018), Morocco Action Plan 2018-2020; https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/morocco/commitments/MO0001/.

Communication in support of Lebanon's open government agenda

Over recent years, successive Lebanese governments have taken steps contributing to more transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in public policy, while signalling support for a broader open government agenda. A number of reforms primarily addressing corruption and ATI have been accompanied by initiatives to modernise the administration.

Prior to the tragic blast at the Port of Beirut in August 2020, these efforts had been in part grounded in the pledges made during the « *Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises* »[2] (CEDRE) of April 2018. These included 11 governance-related measures (such as anti-corruption and digital transformation reforms) as part of a deal to secure foreign funds in loans and grants. Such commitments were reiterated in the subsequent Cabinet's Ministerial Statement of February 2020 in which it pledges to develop a comprehensive package of judicial, administrative, financial and legislative

reforms. It also committed to the swift introduction of new anti-corruption measures (Government of Lebanon, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2020[7]).

Following the Beirut blast, a new draft proposal was introduced by the French government to renew the commitments of implementing reforms within the CEDRE framework (Al Jazeera, 2020[8]). These reforms align with the goals of former and current Lebanese Ministers of State for Administrative Development, who have formally expressed interest in working towards Lebanon's adherence to the *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* and membership of the OGP. A summary of steps in this direction and a detailed roadmap with recommendations are provided in the OECD *Open Government Scan of Lebanon* (OECD, 2020[6]).

As illustrated above, when conducted strategically, communication is an essential enabler of open government principles, and as such should form an important part of any related agenda. However, evidence from the interviews and surveys conducted for this report suggests that this outlook is often absent. Given the status quo in Lebanon, deploying public communication that reinforce transparency, integrity, accountability and participation will depend on the implementation of some of the recommendations provided in Chapters 2 and 3.

In developing their strategies and campaigns, the Lebanese institutions could keep front of mind how these can serve broader open government goals and reflect this when setting out objectives. For instance, communication is an optimal tool for greater transparency. The government may therefore wish to ensure that the information that is made public is comprehensive, easily accessible, and that it is up to date. Key websites could be updated frequently with relevant information, whereas government meetings and parliamentary sessions could be made more transparent through the use of video streaming and social media. In doing so, the goal of communicators would be to ensure that disclosed information is presented in a user-friendly and compelling way, to maximise its relevance and appeal to the broadest audiences. Finland's Central Government Communication guidelines represent well such practices in promoting transparency (Box 4.2).

Similarly, communication strategies and efforts can be designed to serve a diverse set of audiences and ensure that under-represented and vulnerable groups are included in policy dialogues. For instance, they could include dedicated efforts to reach women and youth on key topics relevant to them.[3] This practice has been highlighted by the Ministry of Public Health in its response to the OECD Survey, noting in particular how specific campaigns on health issues affecting women or individuals with special needs and disabilities were designed with those audiences in mind. Similarly, such audience targeting can be conducted with the goal of reaching groups who are less traditionally engaged in public policy by adapting content and messaging to their preferences.

> **Box 4.2. Finland's central government communication policy**
>
> The Finnish Government has introduced policy guidelines that seek to ensure transparency and compliance with stated values in the development and implementation of communication strategies across all ministries.
>
> Notably, these recommend that all government communication be designed to comply with the country's core values of freedom of speech, openness and impartiality. Additionally, all content must use clear, concise and appropriate language so that citizens can easily understand information that is relevant to them.
>
> To this end, the guidelines recommend that the information should be easily accessible and frequently updated through the use of various channels and tools. These include, for instance, streaming press conferences, interactive communications on social media, and engaging content in the form of videos, animations and graphics.
>
> Finally, the guidelines recommend that Finnish officials should strive to be transparent and intelligible in all their work with the public, and senior management, in particular, is expected to lead in reinforcing this culture of transparency and engagement across public administration.
>
> Source: Finnish Government and Prime Minister's Office (n.d.), Central Government Communications Guidelines, https://vnk.fi/en/central-government-communications-guidelines (accessed on 29 April 2021).

Communication could similarly be used by Lebanese institutions to directly raise awareness of opportunities to participate and to target specific under-represented groups for engagement. Despite a recently introduced requirement for public consultations on draft legislation, these are still a rarity in Lebanon (OECD, 2020[6]). However, with the growing focus and commitment to open government reforms, such processes may become more commonplace.[4] Matching communication activities to the consultation process can ensure greater engagement and visibility, and build a continuous link with stakeholders throughout the policy cycle. It is also important that when citizens are invited to participate in policy making or service design, their contribution is acknowledged and that they are made aware of how their input is used. The OECD report *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions Catching the Deliberative Wave* (2020[9]) includes some guidance on communicating around deliberative processes that can be applied in various participation contexts to enhance their impact.

Finally, public communication could also function as an opportunity for participation in itself, whereby citizens are able to react and interact with government content on platforms that permit it (see for example Box 4.3). Social media offers a primary channel to do this, as most platforms' features include tools for replying, reacting, polling, that allow for two-way exchanges that can be made more or less formal. In this sense, social media platforms can be used to create virtual "town halls".

Box 4.3. France's online crowdsourcing platform

In France, interaction between citizens and law makers on substantive policy issues is facilitated via a non-partisan online crowdsourcing platform, "Parlement & Citoyens". This has been launched to bring together elected representatives and citizens to jointly work on draft legislation.

Citizens are drawn to the collaborative process through promotion via digital channels. Indeed, areas of potential policy or reforms are publicised on the site, outlining the key dynamics and areas of consideration. The platform then hosts a consultation phase, during which participants can offer input and communicate with parliamentarians on policy proposals. To this end, debates are organised to further enhance the public consultation and engagement phase. The outcomes of these discussions are then communicated to the wider public, as to favour an overall transparent discourse on policy-making processes.

Parlement & Citoyens also offers users the chance to introduce petitions which, if sufficient support is received, are reviewed and discussed by parliamentarians.

Source: Parlement & Citoyens (now called Purpoz), https://purpoz.com/.

Lebanon's government could similarly consider developing communication strategies around upcoming reforms such as the National Anti-Corruption Strategy or the ATI Implementation Action Plan to promote a whole-of-society culture of integrity that furthers the objectives of these efforts. In parallel with progress to develop a formal open government agenda and pursue membership of the OGP, Lebanon could consider building in greater integration between the work of the agencies in charge of these activities and that of public communicators.

Policy enablers of strategic public communications

As for other elements of its open government drive, Lebanon's reforms concerning public communication would benefit from being grounded in a robust policy and legal environment that ensures they serve to build a genuine dialogue with citizens and contribute to greater transparency and stakeholder participation. Open, two-way flows of information between citizens and their governments are essential to empower the former and ensure that the latter act in compliance with the expressed wishes of the public.

Freedom of expression is therefore a principal foundation of good communication as it guarantees the right to seek, receive, and impart information through various channels regardless of frontiers. Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution states that the freedom to express one's opinion, freedom of the press, assembly, and association are guaranteed within the limits established by law (Lebanese Government, 1926[10]). This right was consolidated when Lebanon adhered to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1967[11]). Despite existing policies, there have been reports indicating recent instances of censorship in the country (Maharat Foundation, 2019[12]; Amnesty International, 2020[13]). Such practices undermine efforts for better communication and erode citizen trust.

Freedom of expression goes hand in hand with the right to information as a policy pillar of public communication. The proactive disclosure of government information is therefore an essential policy that can guide the work of communicators. As noted above, in Lebanon, this is granted under Chapter 2 of the ATI Law, which provides for proactive disclosure of laws, decrees, and decisions within 15 days following their adoption. Importantly, the ATI law stipulates that all relevant documents should be accessible by the public through both online channels and designated Information Officers (MEPI et al., n.d.[14]). While several of Lebanon's ministries and public entities covered by the Law are still working on the

implementation of its provisions, these requirements create opportunities for communicators to eventually integrate relevant disclosures into their work and complement the efforts of Information Officers.

The above legal and policy context can be translated into good practices at a more direct level. Public communicators in Lebanon may benefit from developing practical guidelines that support the application of freedom expression and ATI provisions, for instance. These could set out, among other things, guidance for engaging with and moderating user comments on social media. For example, they could help account administrators distinguish between hate speech or harmful content and take appropriate actions; similarly, they could provide a template for integrating proactive disclosures under the ATI Law into the planning of their activities.

Finally, public communication in support of the open government principles can be sustained by a policy framework that ensures a measure of distinction between institutional and political messages. As noted in Chapter 2, as part of the institutionalisation of this function it will be important to develop policy frameworks that foster and protect apolitical and institution-centred communications.

The role of media ecosystems for transparency, integrity and accountability in Lebanon

As illustrated at the beginning of the present chapter, the media has a primary role in furthering the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder participation. In this respect, Lebanon has a vast and diverse media sector that benefits from one of the most liberal ecosystems in the region. With a legacy of some ten privately-owned daily newspapers in four languages, and over 1 500 weekly and monthly periodicals, at its peak, Lebanon produced about half of the region's print media (Freedom House, 2011[15]). The country also has nine television stations and about five major radio stations and a dozen of small ones (European Journalism Centre, 2021[16]). Additionally, in the wake of the autumn 2019 protests, new alternative platforms, primarily independent digital media outlets, emerged as a main source of coverage for younger generations, but also for foreign networks (Freedom House, 2020[17]).

The liberalisation of the state monopoly on broadcasting in 1994 meant that Lebanon was the first country in the Middle East to authorise private ownership of radio and television stations (El Richani, 2014[18]). The 1994 Audio-Visual Law additionally established the National Audio-Visual Council (NAVC) as the licence- and frequency-granting body, with the goal to bring under control the multiple informal stations that had emerged (El Richani, 2014[18]). Key legislation includes the Press Law, which dates back to 1962 and concerns print media. It sets up distinct bodies to group and regulate media owners, the Lebanese Press Syndicate, and the Editors Syndicate. Significantly, the law tasked the Ministry of Information with monitoring the financing sources of outlets.

For the most part, Lebanese news outlets act as watchdogs and contribute to holding public institutions and officials to account. However, there is greater scope for supporting healthy media ecosystems and their contribution to open government objectives though policy interventions. This is particularly true in the current context of rising mis- and dis- information, which the media is well-placed to mitigate through quality journalism.

Additionally, as for media around the world, Lebanese outlets have been suffering from funding difficulties, which has led numerous media outlets to close down. The media business model has not been reformed since the 1970s and outlets have not always been able to successfully achieve digital transformation. With the financial crisis that hit the country in autumn 2019, many journalists saw their salaries cut by their employing media institution (European Journalism Centre, 2021[16]).

Like many countries, the degree of media independence and objectivity can also pose a challenge even in a highly pluralistic ecosystem. Lebanon's media landscape indeed seems to mirror the consociational structure of the political system of the country, which in practice means that journalism can sometimes take

sectarian characters and carry political biases (El Richani, 2014[18]). 43% of media outlets are either directly or indirectly owned by 12 families with ties to political parties. This is particularly the case in the print, television and radio sectors (Samir Kassir Foundation, 2018[19]). Based on evidence from the Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon, a CSO-led initiative between Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders, out of 37 selected media outlets, 29 were found to be directly politically affiliated (Samir Kassir Foundation, 2018[19]).

In the eyes of citizens, this aspect can undermine the reliability and trustworthiness of some Lebanese media as catalysts for transparency and accountability. However, a number of independent media also exist. Indeed frustration among some audience groups (particularly young ones) with some outlets' perceived bias has fuelled demand for a new generation of digital media start-ups.

Alongside private outlets, the government funds through the Ministry of Information two state broadcasters, Télé Liban and Radio Liban, and a newswire service, the National News Agency (NNA). These are important stakeholders in supporting government transparency and expanding the reach of its messages to citizens. The NNA, a newswire, is a primary channel for the dissemination of official information, and covers all government activities alongside current affairs. With around 140 reporters countrywide, it produces reporting that is available for syndication to other news outlets.

The NNA, Télé Liban and Radio Liban have the potential to be an important source of objective public-interest information in an environment where other media often take sides. For this reason, it is important that these outlets continue to receive adequate funding and are kept free of political interference, including through the oversight by the country's media regulator, the National Media Council (NMC). The latter is also an important actor in advancing the media's contribution to the open government principles, namely by playing a larger role to ensure journalistic standards are upheld. Similarly, it can extend its role to provide guidance for news outlets to combat disinformation and misinformation.

In its February 2020 Ministerial Statement, the Diab Cabinet had pledged to prepare a unified draft law to upgrade the media regulatory framework in light of the rise of digital and social media, and ensure in parallel protection of freedom of opinion and expression (Government of Lebanon, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2020[20]). In May 2020, then-Minister of Information echoed the need for an improved regulatory and enforcement system for the media, while noting that "public information should not be subordinate to any political guardianship, but must be free within certain controls, and not directed or affiliated with the state, but rather serve the citizen" (Government of Lebanon, Ministry of Information, 2020[21]). Although the subsequent policy proposal received criticism from some civil society organisations that it fell short of the above objectives (Amnesty International, 2020[13]), new efforts to reform the current system remain necessary for ensuring a resilient media ecosystem.

The current regulatory landscape, particularly provisions relating to libel and defamation, has been highlighted by some as leaving scope for its application in restriction of free speech. Indeed, since the October 2019 demonstrations, observers have noted cases of social media activists being detained, journalists being investigated or being tried for defamation, including following their reporting on corruption (Maharat Foundation, 2019[22]; Human Rigths Watch, 2019[23]).

These examples suggest that the liberalisation of the media ecosystem and the upholding of freedom of expression in Lebanon are not yet fully achieved. New legal and regulatory reforms, as noted above, would offer an important opportunity for updating how harmful or libellous content is dealt with in the digital age, in respect of essential freedoms and with the goal to safeguard the media's ability to hold the government to account.

In addition, a new government may consider introducing measures to combat disinformation and misinformation in parallel, for instance by supporting the media sector and independent fact-checking organisations.[5] There are growing examples of initiatives where different players in the media ecosystem collaborate against misinformation, as described in Box 4.4 below. Providing direct assistance and

amplifying similar efforts in Lebanon would help counterbalance the diffusion of less reliable content online and in traditional media.

Box 4.4. Multi-stakeholder fact-checking initiative in Mexico

During Mexico's 2018 general election, a group of more than 90 local and national actors in Mexico, including television networks, newspapers, and radio stations, along with universities and NGOs, collaborated on a fact-checking initiative called *Verificado 2018*. This initiative, which was created and directed by *Animal Político*, *Newsweek en español*, *Pop up Newsroom*, and *AJ+ Español*, sought to debunk false content and identify the entities responsible for misusing information.

Verificado 2018 used a search engine powered by artificial intelligence to monitor misinformation and report any problems encountered at polling stations during the election. Daily fact-checks of the day were distributed to all media partners, who subsequently published accurate reporting.

To fight the rapid spread of false information among the citizenry, the initiative promoted the use of the hashtags *#Verificado2018* and *#EstoSíPasó* ("#thisdidhappen") on the content shared on the platform to certify it. This initiative also supported media literacy by educating readers on how to identify false information and on understanding the role of the media.

A decisive element to the initiative's success was the collaboration between the 90 partners, who all brought their own skills and expertise. For example, *Animal Político* centralised all the information and set up a team of ten fact-checkers and two co-ordinators who worked full-time to monitor content and confirm sources.

Source: Verificado2018 (2018[24]), "Así funciona #Verificado2018 – Metodología", https://verificado.mx/metodologia/; Terceros (2018[25]), "Ahead of Mexico's largest election, Verificado 2018 sets an example for collaborative journalism", https://ijnet.org/en/story/ahead-mexico%E2%80%99s-largest-election-verificado-2018-sets-example-collaborative-journalism.

Recommendations

The recommendations below summarise the proposed approaches that Lebanon can adopt to make public communication and media ecosystems work to further the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and participation.

- Lebanon's government could envision public communication as a pillar of its ongoing efforts to introduce open government reforms and its aspirations to bring these reforms under a unified agenda or strategy. In particular, under OMSAR's leadership, this could include reforms for institutionalisation proposed in Chapter 2, but also formal requirements in upcoming open government strategic documents that communications are conducted to further transparency and facilitate participation, accompanied with guidelines on how to do so.

- Within the same context of reform, and in particular, in the implementation of recommendations from the OECD *Open Government Scan of Lebanon* (2020[6]), OMSAR should lead public communication and advocacy efforts, both internally and externally, to increase familiarity with related concepts and policy initiatives and gain support for them. For instance, co-ordinating internal government-wide campaigns on the open government agenda would be a key step to ensuring widespread buy-in from civil servants. In the short term, OMSAR could develop such a campaign on ATI implementation.

- Pending any official reform, Lebanese institutions could begin to take up an outlook in their work that aligns with the open government principles, both individually or as part of co-ordination through the inter-ministerial committee proposed earlier.

  o An immediate step to support the principle of transparency, would be for Lebanese communicators to use proactive disclosures under the ATI Law in their work and in co-ordination with the relevant Information Officers. OMSAR could lead the development of a set of dedicated guidelines to advise on applying the above recommendation.

  o Lebanon's public service media could be another asset for transparency: the NNA newswire, for instance, could be used to disseminate periodical round-ups of proactively disclosed information under the ATI Law for other media to easily access and use in their reporting.

- To foster greater objectivity and quality journalism that can further accountability, the Lebanese government would benefit from ensuring adequate funding for public media. At the same time the Ministry of Information and National Media Council, in co-ordination with journalist unions, should develop new standards for journalism that include, for instance, requirements on fact-checking.

- Over the medium term, a new administration could continue the work on a new regulatory framework for the media fit for the digital age, in collaboration with key non-governmental stakeholders. This ought to support a more diverse ecosystem and the role of digital and traditional media to expand public debate. A new framework could importantly include provisions to mitigate the spread of mis- and dis- information, by introducing requirements for platforms' and media's treatment of problematic content. Finally, this framework should include legal safeguards for journalists investigating and exposing wrongdoing by public officials, to restrict the application of other laws that in some cases can amount to censorship.

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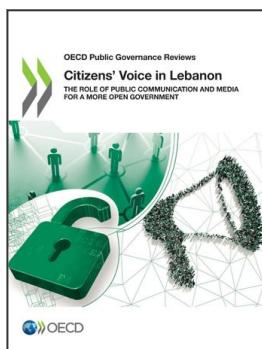Lebanese Government (1926), "The Lebanese Constitution", [10]
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Notes

[1] For an in-depth assessment of the mechanisms whereby media and communication can support transparency, accountability and participation, see Khemani, Stuti, et al. (2016[26]), *Making politics work for development : harnessing transparency and citizen engagement,* Policy Research Reports World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/268021467831470443/Making-politics-work-for-development-harnessing-transparency-and-citizen-engagement.

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[3] For detailed recommendations on engaging youth in public life and policy see OECD (2020[27]), *Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit for All Generations?*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c3e5cb8a-en.

[4] More extensive recommendations on citizen participation and consultations are included in the *Open Government Scan of Lebanon* report (OECD, 2020[6]).

[5] For examples of regulatory frameworks and policy concerning disinformation see Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni (2020[1]), "Governance responses to disinformation: How open government principles can inform policy options", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 39, OECD Publishing, Paris.