PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN LEBANON

REPORT OF FINDINGS

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THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Independent media in Lebanon remain a vital pillar of freedom of expression and democratic resilience but now operate in an environment of crisis, fragmentation, and deep public mistrust. Years of economic collapse, political paralysis, and conflict have reshaped how Lebanese citizens access and interpret information. This study, commissioned by the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) and conducted by Ipsos in September 2025, explores how audiences across Lebanon perceive, trust, and engage with independent media.

The research engaged participants across ten focus groups representing diverse regions, age groups, and socio-economic backgrounds. Discussions examined evolving news habits, perceptions of credibility, and emotional responses to independent media content and website design.

The findings reveal that Lebanese audiences are highly informed but deeply distrustful. News consumption has shifted from civic participation to a coping mechanism amid fear and uncertainty, with WhatsApp emerging as the dominant channel for real-time updates. In this fragmented ecosystem, trust has become experiential rather than institutional. Accordingly, people rely on what they see, share, or live, rather than what the established media reports. The concept of "independent media" remains fluid and largely misunderstood, often equated with neutrality or authenticity rather than editorial or financial autonomy.

Content testing showed that humanitarian and social-justice narratives resonate strongly across sectarian and class divides, while overtly political content often generates fatigue and skepticism. Despite strong emotional reactions, audiences exhibit learned helplessness: they trust facts but doubt that journalism can drive change. Website testing further revealed that design now serves as a marker of credibility, with clean, accessible, bilingual layouts perceived as more trustworthy than cluttered or English-heavy ones.

The study concludes that Lebanon's citizens are hyper-informed yet disempowered, consuming vast amounts of information without faith in institutions or belief in their own civic agency. Key recommendations include reframing media independence as a form of public service centered on transparency, empathy, and relevance; prioritizing solution-oriented and human-centered storytelling that connects journalism to daily life; and investing in Arabic-first, mobile-friendly, and visually professional content formats to expand accessibility and trust.

Independent outlets should also engage youth through participatory storytelling and collaborations with credible digital voices, bridging generational divides in information consumption. Finally, long-term resilience requires building a cooperative ecosystem through shared infrastructure, regional partnerships, and diversified funding streams, ensuring that independent media can endure beyond crisis moments and rebuild public confidence in truthful, inclusive journalism.

II. INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Independent media in Lebanon has long stood as a critical pillar of democratic life and civic engagement, distinguishing the country's media landscape within the Arab region for its relative pluralism and openness. Historically, Lebanon has been recognized for its vibrant press environment, where diverse political, cultural, and social viewpoints could be expressed with fewer constraints than elsewhere in the region[1]. Within this environment, independent media organizations have played a particularly vital role in preserving journalistic integrity and public accountability.

Unlike partisan outlets, they have strived to maintain editorial independence, offering a counter-balance to entrenched political narratives and sectarian discourse. Through their commitment to investigative reporting, cultural production, and fact-based journalism, these outlets have provided platforms for underrepresented voices and fostered spaces for critical and constructive debate[2]. In doing so, independent media has contributed not only to transparency and public accountability but also to the protection of fundamental freedoms and the strengthening of civic participation in a context where trust in political institutions and official sources has often been limited[3].

Yet today, Lebanon's independent media sector finds itself at a critical crossroads, facing an unprecedented convergence of political, economic, and structural challenges that threaten its very survival. The country's protracted economic collapse, which began in 2019, has devastated the financial underpinnings of the media industry. Advertising revenues have plummeted as businesses shut down or slashed budgets, while the Lebanese pound's dramatic devaluation has made operating costs, particularly for equipment, staff salaries, and technology, unsustainable[4]. This economic crisis has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating Beirut Port explosion in 2020, and ongoing regional instability, all of which have further weakened institutional resilience. Many independent outlets now struggle to maintain basic operations, retain qualified staff, and uphold

1 Freedom House. *License to Censor: The Use of Media Regulation to Restrict Press Freedom – Lebanon*. Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, October 2011.
2 Bakr, J., Safieddine, K., & Safwan, J. (2020). *Independent Media in Lebanon: Content Analysis and Public Appeal*. Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and Samir Kassir Foundation.
3 El-Helou, Z. S. (2025, August 20). *Voices under Siege: Monitoring Freedom of Speech in Lebanon*. Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.
4 Atallah, S., Dagher, G., Zoughaib, S. (2023, July). *Follow the Money: The Informal Channels of Lebanese Media Funding*. The Policy Initiative and Samir Kassir Foundation.

their editorial missions amid shrinking financial resources and an increasingly hostile environment for free expression[5].

These economic pressures unfold within a broader media ecosystem still heavily shaped by political and sectarian patronage. Many of Lebanon's mainstream media outlets remain owned or financed by political parties, business elites, or foreign backers, whose influence often determines editorial lines[6]. This structure severely limits the space for genuinely independent journalism and amplifies the risks faced by outlets that attempt to challenge dominant political or sectarian narratives[7]. Independent media organizations, therefore, navigate a landscape of financial hardship, political intimidation, and censorship, pressures that fuel widespread self-censorship and inhibit critical reporting. The result is a shrinking space for accountability journalism at a moment when such scrutiny is most needed.

The digital transition, while expanding opportunities for outreach and audience engagement, has introduced a new set of complex challenges. Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for independent outlets to reach audiences in Lebanon and across the diaspora. However, these same platforms have also become battlegrounds for disinformation, coordinated smear campaigns, and online harassment targeting journalists and media organizations. The algorithmic amplification of sensationalist, polarizing content has further eroded public trust in information ecosystems, blurring the line between credible reporting and partisan propaganda[8]. In this fragmented digital environment, independent journalists must constantly fight to assert credibility and counter misinformation, often with limited resources and institutional protection.

Meanwhile, the decline in international donor funding, long a critical lifeline for independent and investigative journalism, has placed the sector under additional strain. Many outlets have been forced to pivot toward short-term, project-based work that responds to donor priorities rather than long-term editorial strategies grounded in audience needs[9]. This shift has constrained geographic and thematic coverage, limited opportunities for investigative reporting, and weakened institutional sustainability. The absence of stable funding has also hindered investment in innovation, technology, and staff development, factors essential for maintaining relevance and competitiveness in an increasingly digital media landscape. The January 2025 freeze on U.S. foreign aid has further exacerbated these challenges, disrupting funding pipelines and intensifying financial uncertainty across Lebanon's independent media sector[10].

5 International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) (2021). *Media in Lebanon: One Year After the Beirut Blast.*
6 Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon (2024). Global Media Registry and Samir Kassir Foundation.
7 Media Diversity Institute (2023). *Silencing Lebanon: Journalists Under Pressure on Multiple Fronts.*
8 Reporters Without Borders. (n.d.). *Lebanon.* Retrieved August 25, 2025, from Lebanon | RSF.
9 "Lebanon's Financial Crisis Leaves Its Envied Media Industry in Freefall." *The Guardian,* 10 February 2020.
10 Jarbouh, W. (2025, April). *Impact of U.S. Government Funding Suspension on Independent Media in Lebanon.* Samir Kassir Foundation.

Taken together, these intersecting crises have reshaped the realities of independent journalism in Lebanon. The sector's dual struggle for survival and credibility underscores the urgent need to understand how Lebanese audiences currently perceive, engage with, and evaluate independent media. As the information ecosystem becomes more fragmented and trust in institutions continues to erode, examining shifts in audience attitudes and behaviors is essential for informing effective interventions[11]. Generating robust, evidence-based insights into these dynamics will not only shed light on the sector's current resilience but also guide future strategies to strengthen its sustainability, reach, and democratic role.

OBJECTIVES

Building on the 2020 baseline study conducted by the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) on audience perceptions of independent media in Lebanon[12], this study seeks to capture how these perceptions and engagement patterns have evolved amid the country's deepening economic, political, and digital transformations. The original baseline established a crucial understanding of public attitudes toward independent media, revealing both the trust and skepticism that shape how Lebanese audiences consume and evaluate information. Five years later, Lebanon's media landscape has undergone profound changes that necessitate renewed examination, including the financial collapse, shifts in donor funding, intensified political polarization, and the growing dominance of social media as a primary news source.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to assess the current state of public trust, recognition, and engagement with independent media, while identifying the emerging challenges and opportunities that influence audience behavior in today's fragmented information ecosystem. By comparing findings with the 2020 results, the research will generate evidence-based insights to guide strategies that enhance the credibility, reach, and resilience of independent media in Lebanon.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. **Understand audience perceptions**
   Assess current levels of trust, credibility, and professionalism attributed to independent media, and explore how these perceptions have evolved across different demographic and social groups since 2020.

11 Ghanem, M. (2024, January). *Public Opinion — Perspectives on Governance and Civil Society Organizations in Lebanon.* Samir Kassir Foundation.
12 Bakr et al., *op. cit.*

2. **Analyze patterns of engagement**
   Examine how audiences interact with independent media content online, including reactions, comments, and sharing behaviors across diverse post types such as investigative reporting, political commentary, and cultural content.

3. **Map dominant themes and sentiments**
   Identify dominant themes and sentiments in audience discussions, focusing on polarization, misinformation, and civic engagement, to understand how public discourse shapes and reflects trust in independent media.

4. **Inform strategic recommendations**
   Generate evidence-based guidance for SKF and partners to strengthen the sustainability, visibility, and credibility of independent media, supporting its ongoing role in transparency, accountability, and civic dialogue.

III. METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION APPROACH AND SAMPLE DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative approach, using focus group discussions (FGDs) as the primary method to capture in-depth insights into public perceptions of independent media in Lebanon, with a focus on trust, credibility, and content recognition amid ongoing socioeconomic, security, and political challenges.

A total of 10 FGDs were conducted, each lasting approximately 1.5 to 2 hours with 6 to 8 participants, ensuring space for rich and interpretive dialogue. All groups included participants aged 18–30 and mixed gender, except for three specific target groups: Women-only, Youth (18–24), and Elderly (60+) groups. Participants were selected to ensure geographic, demographic, and social diversity, including representation by region, age, education, and socio-economic status.

The FGDs were structured as follows:

Target Group	Number of FGDs
Beirut	1
Mount Lebanon	1
Northern Lebanon (North Lebanon and Akkar)	1
Southern Lebanon (South Lebanon and Nabatiyeh)	1
Bekaa (Bekaa and Baalbek-Hermel)	1
Women-only	1
Youth (18–24)	1
Elderly (60+)	1
Socio-economically disadvantaged (low income & education)	1
High-education professionals (high income & education)	1
Total	**10**

This design ensures both breadth and depth: five FGDs capture regional variations, while the additional groups explore differences across key demographic segments. Balanced gender and age representation within each group allows for capturing diverse perspectives.

Content and Homepage Reactions

In addition to general discussions, participants were shown anonymized excerpts of five to six posts and five to six media homepages from independent and traditional outlets. Discussions explored:

- Recognition and credibility of the content
- Perceived tone, style, and professionalism
- Likelihood of sharing or engaging with the content
- Suggestions for improving trustworthiness and appeal

By adopting this structure, the study facilitates cross-sectional and comparative analysis aligned with the research objectives and enables benchmarking against the 2020 SKF baseline study, providing a robust understanding of shifts in public perceptions, trust, and engagement with independent media in Lebanon.

LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into audience perceptions of independent media in Lebanon, a few limitations should be noted. The research relies solely on FGDs, which offer rich and in-depth perspectives but do not allow for statistically generalizable findings across the broader Lebanese population.

Each FGD included 6 to 8 participants, and although the sample was diverse in terms of region, age, gender, and socio-economic status, it may not fully capture the views of all demographic subgroups, particularly populations outside the selected groups. Data are based on participants' self-reported media habits and perceptions, which can be influenced by social desirability bias or recall limitations, especially regarding sensitive topics such as trust in media or political orientation.

Regarding content testing, the original plan proposed showing participants a larger number of posts and media homepages. However, due to time constraints within the 90-minute FGDs, the materials were reduced to five to six posts and websites, which may have limited the range of responses and the diversity of content exposure. Despite these constraints, the study provides robust qualitative evidence on trends, perceptions, and engagement patterns, offering actionable insights to inform the strategies of SKF and its partners in strengthening independent media in Lebanon.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

AUDIENCE PROFILES

Key Demographics

The study engaged 78 participants across ten focus groups, capturing a diverse cross-section of Lebanese society navigating multiple crises. This purposive sampling brought together voices from Lebanon's varied geographic, socio-economic, and generational landscapes, offering crucial insights into how different populations perceive and engage with independent media.

Geographic Diversity
Participants represented all major governorates, from Bekaa Valley residents describing their towns as "civilized yet abandoned by the state," to Beirut's urban dwellers spanning upscale Ashrafieh to working-class Burj Hammoud. Northern participants from Tripoli and Akkar highlighted regional security challenges, while Southern voices from Marjeyoun and Bint Jbeil carried stories of displacement and conflict. Several participants had migrated internally for economic survival. One Bekaa father relocated his family to Beirut seeking opportunities, while a young woman from the South fled due to war.

Age and Educational Context
The sample skewed young, with most respondents aged 18 to 25 years old, a generation that came of age amid the 2019 economic collapse, pandemic, and Beirut port explosion. This youth demographic proved essential given their digital nativity and participation in recent civic movements. Educational backgrounds varied significantly: nearly half were university students or graduates from institutions like the Lebanese American University (LAU) and American University of Beirut (AUB) pursuing practical fields from nursing to engineering, often with emigration plans. Other respondents completed secondary education but couldn't afford university, while some had left school early, primarily due to economic pressures.

Economic Conditions and Professional Diversity
The economic profile revealed Lebanon's eroding middle class. Delivery drivers working multiple shifts sat alongside unemployed former government workers and students who abandoned studies when fees became unaffordable. One former taxi driver captured this decline, explaining he quit after COVID when currency collapse made the work unsustainable. Women comprised almost half

of participants, ranging from healthcare workers and teachers to young mothers who sacrificed careers for family responsibilities.

Professional diversity spanned formal and informal sectors: nurses sharing frontline crisis experiences, small business owners illustrating entrepreneurial vulnerability, and engineering students representing Lebanon's brain drain. Two participants joined from their studies in France and Germany, embodying the diaspora's continued but increasingly tenuous connection to home, living as "strangers abroad." They spoke of the need to think long-term: although they currently reside overseas, they would always consider returning to Lebanon, as they still feel a sense of non-belonging in their host countries, despite holding citizenship. As one participant from the high-education group expressed, "We don't belong to that country, even if we have the citizenship. We are still considered strangers. We are strangers abroad."

News Consumption Patterns and Interests

Heightened Engagement During Crisis

The study reveals a dramatic intensification of news consumption patterns directly correlated with Lebanon's cascading crises, particularly the recent war. Across all demographic groups, participants reported a marked shift from casual or intermittent news following to near-constant monitoring. This crisis-driven consumption was particularly pronounced among those with family in conflict-affected areas, with one participant describing sleepless nights tracking humanitarian convoys to Gaza, following updates "from 12 midnight till 7am. "The September-November 2024 war emerged as a watershed moment in media consumption habits, with multiple participants noting they "didn't follow the news" before the conflict but now check updates "every minute." This shift transcends demographic boundaries suggesting that existential threats have broadened previously fragmented consumption patterns.

> **"Ever since the war, we follow the news 24/7."**
>
> – Respondent from the Bekaa FGD

Accordingly, daily news consumption has become the norm across all focus groups, with most participants reporting multiple check-ins throughout the day. Young participants particularly described an almost continuous engagement, with one noting, "We're all active on social media and using our phones, so it's normal that we come across news, 24 hours per day."

> **"It's essential to stay updated and aware of your country's news and your area's news in order to feel safe and secure your future and family."**
>
> – Respondent from the Elderly Group

The compulsive nature of this consumption reflects deep anxiety about Lebanon's trajectory. This defensive consumption, news as survival strategy rather than civic engagement, permeated discussions across groups.

Platform Preferences and Digital Dominance

WhatsApp emerged as the dominant news distribution platform[13] through groups that function as curated news aggregators, with participants describing constant notifications and updates "every time something happens." Popular groups mentioned include "961 Times," "Akhbar Al Lahza," and location-specific groups like "Bint Jbeil news."

Social media platforms form the second tier of news consumption, with generational differences apparent in platform preferences. Instagram and TikTok dominated among youth participants, who described discovering news while "scrolling" rather than actively seeking information. On the other hand, traditional television news retained relevance primarily among older participants and during major events, though economic constraints limited access.

Thematic Priorities and Topic Preferences

Political and security news dominated consumption across all groups, reflecting Lebanon's perpetual state of instability. This security-first orientation, brought about by the convergence of war, economic collapse, and political tensions, was particularly acute among participants from border regions and those with family in conflict zones. Economic news formed the second major category, with participants obsessively tracking dollar rates, gold prices, and fuel costs, metrics of daily survival in a collapsed economy. Notable demographic variations emerged in secondary interests. Male participants frequently mentioned sports, particularly football, as a relief from crisis news. Female participants in mixed groups showed greater interest in social issues and lifestyle content, though the women's focus group revealed equal engagement with political and security topics. Youth participants uniquely mentioned their following of "bloggers" and "podcasts," suggesting generational shifts in information format preferences.

"Lebanon is always in war mode."

– Respondent from the Socio-economically Disadvantaged Group

Emotional and Psychological Dimensions

The emotional toll of constant crisis news consumption emerged as a significant theme. Participants described news consumption as inducing "stress," "fear," "anxiety," and "headaches." Discussion also captured the exhaustion and cynicism pervading the media landscape.

"There is no credibility anymore."

– Respondent from the Elderly Group

Yet despite this emotional burden, participants felt compelled to continue consuming news. "We are overwhelmed, but we have to check the news," explained one participant, articulating the bind between psychological well-being and the perceived necessity of staying informed. What appears as "addiction" among professionals or urban youth is better understood as information anxiety: a

13 Baydoun, R. et al (2023, September). *WhatsApp 360: Mapping Information Circulation and Influence in Lebanon's Digital Sphere*. Influeanswers, Samir Kassir Foundaiton, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

condition produced by volatility, where knowledge equates to safety. The intensity of monitoring also mirrors structural inequalities: those with fewer resources or unstable power supply cannot afford information downtime.

This compulsive consumption pattern, driven by fear rather than curiosity or civic duty, suggests fundamental shifts in the social role of news media during a prolonged crisis, where information consumption becomes both a survival strategy and an emotional stressor.

Key Takeaway

These consumption patterns reveal a Lebanese public caught between information necessity and emotional exhaustion, between the multiplication of sources and the erosion of trust, between global connectivity and local survival. The findings suggest that the crisis has fundamentally altered not just what news Lebanese consume, but how they relate to information itself, transforming news from a tool of civic engagement into an instrument of daily navigation through perpetual uncertainty.

MEDIA HABITS AND INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Platform Hierarchy and the Digital-Traditional Divide

WhatsApp as National Information Infrastructure

Across all groups, WhatsApp has evolved from a simple messaging app into Lebanon's primary channel for news circulation, functioning as an essential part of the country's information infrastructure. Yet, usage patterns vary sharply by demographic and class. Youth and professionals manage multiple specialized groups, from legacy media channels (MTV, Al Jadeed) to hyperlocal community networks such as "Baalbek Hamiye" or "Bint Jbeil." By contrast, lower-income participants rely on a limited number of community groups, often depending on neighbors when mobile data is unaffordable. As one youth summarized: "If someone doesn't have 3G, he won't open Instagram or Facebook; he only uses WhatsApp."

> **"Before the war, I wasn't part of any WhatsApp group. Now I'm in seven!"**
>
> – Respondent from the Women Group

Generational Divides in Platform Preferences and Consumption Patterns

Media consumption patterns reveal a clear generational stratification of trust and agency.

- **Youth (18–24)** navigate fluidly across platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where exposure is personalized and participatory. As such, respondents identified Instagram as their main news source, where news "finds them" through algorithmic feeds.

- **Middle-aged participants (25–45)** occupy an in-between space, combining immediacy (WhatsApp and Facebook) with the credibility anchors of television, reflecting hybrid media habits.

- **Elderly participants** meanwhile, remain attached to linear broadcasting, treating media as a continuous companion rather than a source to be verified. Accordingly, respondents primarily rely on television and radio.

"I think that the news looks for us!"

– Respondent from the North Group

This generational layering suggests a transitional media culture, where old and new logics of trust coexist but rarely intersect. As such, youth demonstrated high adaptability to algorithmically curated news, embracing the way social feeds deliver content directly to them, which reflects both digital nativity and a shift toward passive discovery. In contrast, older participants maintained deliberate, scheduled consumption, privileging routine and familiar sources over algorithmic exposure.

Television's Resilient but Fractured Role

Television endures less as a source of authority than as an emotional and cultural constant. It provides familiarity amid uncertainty, even for viewers who no longer believe in its neutrality. Moreover, sectarian loyalties continue to shape channel preferences, yet educated professionals now use the same outlets comparatively, transforming television from a site of passive consumption to active verification. The result is counter-intuitive to a certain extent: television continues to serve as a reference point for credibility, but not necessarily for trust, anchoring audiences in a fragmented yet familiar media environment.

"I follow channels from both sides to judge credibility."

– Respondent from the High-Education Group

Verification Strategies Across Demographics

The Three-Source Rule and Social Verification

Participants across all backgrounds described some version of a "three-source rule" for verifying information, though the process varies in sophistication. Educated professionals cross-check local, international, and digital sources, while less-educated groups depend more on communal confirmation through WhatsApp exchanges or coffee-shop discussions. Women highlighted collective morning routines of verifying circulating news, while Southern residents often confirmed reports by directly contacting relatives in conflict areas.

Evidence Hierarchies and Technological Awareness

Attitudes toward evidence reflected both educational and structural divides. Educated and younger participants demonstrated critical awareness of digital manipulation, recognizing how images and videos can be staged or edited. Yet, in contradiction, visual content remained the most powerful credibility cue. Accordingly, many participants, especially from less-educated backgrounds, reported trusting information only when accompanied by a photo or video. Regional patterns reinforced this divide: in the South, speed often outweighed accuracy, with verification anchored in immediacy and lived experience, while in the North, distrust of national media and feelings of misrepresentation drove reliance on local networks for validation.

> **"Even if they share pictures and videos, some of them might be edited and fake."**
>
> – Respondent from the Bekaa Group

Together, these layered hierarchies of evidence highlight how technological literacy, insecurity, and unequal access shape distinct modes of "seeing to believe," where visual proof continues to define truth even amid growing awareness of its fragility.

Information Sharing as Social Practice

Information sharing in Lebanon functions less as dissemination and more as social performance. It is considered a way to enact belonging, signal awareness, and reaffirm communal ties. This was evident across the focus groups, where participants described strong in-group sharing within sectarian and regional boundaries. Bekaa participants reported immediately forwarding news "related to Hezbollah or Amal, something directly related to us," while participants from Mount Lebanon exhibited similar patterns for issues affecting their own communities. The digital sphere thus mirrors Lebanon's social structure: information flows vertically within sectarian and local networks rather than horizontally across them.

> **"I belong to a certain political party; therefore, I share any news related to this party."**
>
> – Respondent from the Mount Lebanon Group

Nonetheless, sharing behavior during the conflict reveals the social labor of information: Southern participants became informal crisis broadcasters, transforming networks into life-saving infrastructures. Yet this same system also entrenches echo chambers, where trust and identity reinforce each other. In effect, the very networks that sustain resilience under crisis also limit epistemic diversity, embedding solidarity and polarization in the same digital circuits.

The Transformation Since the 2023-2024 Conflict

From Diversity to Survival Mode

The conflict accelerated Lebanon's shift from pluralistic media consumption to instrumental information use, with respondents viewing news as a means of risk management rather than deliberation. This shift compressed the spectrum of interests: entertainment, policy, and international coverage gave way to immediate survival concerns. Youth reported heightened political awareness: "Before, I didn't care. Now I want to know," reflecting how crises can accelerate civic interest and awareness. Nonetheless, exposure to direct conflict prompted a "credibility reckoning". Participants with direct exposure to violence developed acute source discrimination, learning to distinguish between outlets that provided accurate warnings and those that exaggerated events. "During that time, we knew who was honest and who was not," said one participant from the South.

"Nothing is more important than politics now."

– Respondent from the South Group

Those in safer areas applied different credibility criteria, valuing sources that avoided panic while still providing useful information. Educated professionals particularly appreciated outlets that "take their time to be sure of news credibility." Citing MTV's slower but verified reporting approach as an example.

Yet crisis conditions intensified polarization, as seen when some Shia participants completely lost trust in the same MTV following perceived biased coverage, revealing how exposure to conflict reinforces selective trust and entrenches political divides.

Digital Divides and Lingering Inequalities

Conflict magnified the digital inequalities that structure Lebanon's information access. Connectivity, electricity, and device quality determine not only who participates in the news cycle but whose version of reality circulates. In this sense, the digital divide is also narrative, stratifying not just access to information but visibility within the public sphere.

Psychological consequences reflect these hierarchies. Constant monitoring among youth and professionals reveals the emotional cost of informational privilege, while those excluded from continuous access experience informational precarity, depending on others for updates and, by extension, for safety.

These dynamics underscore that Lebanon's information ecosystem, under crisis and conflicts, is not just technologically uneven but emotionally and cognitively stratified, where the ability to disengage becomes a form of privilege.

Key Takeaway

Lebanon's information ecosystem is characterized by a striking paradox: while access to news is widespread, public trust remains deeply eroded. Rather than forming a unified public sphere, information flows through fragmented and parallel systems shaped by class, sect, and generation. These divisions mirror Lebanon's broader social fractures, producing a media landscape defined by constant connectivity, persistent distrust, and increasingly divergent perceptions of reality.

PERCEPTIONS OF CREDIBILITY AND TRUST

Defining Trustworthiness: Fragmented Criteria

Political Alignment as the Primary Filter

Political affiliation remained the dominant lens through which participants evaluated media credibility, though its expression varied by demographic. In the Bekaa region, trust was deeply entwined with political identity. As such, participants believed only sources aligned with their worldview, especially during moments of crisis. One participant illustrated this dynamic through their reaction to news of Hassan Nasrallah's death, noting that they dismissed reports from other channels but only accepted the information once it appeared on Al Manar and outlets affiliated with their political party. Here, trust functioned not as a measure of journalistic integrity but as an affirmation of belonging, illustrating how media consumption can reinforce identity rather than information.

> **"Due to their [media outlet] political affiliation, you lost trust."**
>
> – Respondent from the Bekaa Group

Among highly educated professionals, bias was recognized as inevitable but manageable. They consumed across partisan lines as a deliberate verification strategy, treating political alignment as a variable to be accounted for rather than a disqualifier. Youth, however, expressed fatigue and cynicism toward politicized media, stating: "I don't trust any channel... they are all the same."

Reputation and Evidence Standards

Trust was also mediated by perceived reputation and evidence. Older participants maintained habitual trust in long-standing outlets, with nostalgic loyalty often outweighing critical evaluation. Younger participants and socio-economically vulnerable groups, lacking resources to cross-check, relied on repeated demonstration of reliability or established reputations. Professionals, however, viewed longevity with suspicion, interpreting long-standing institutions as potentially politically captured.

Evidence standards diverged sharply by education and context. Youth prioritized visual proof yet recognized potential manipulation, while Southern participants, exposed to recurring conflict, valued predictive accuracy, trusting sources that reliably forecasted airstrikes. Professionals demanded deeper context and logical framing, treating the quality of reporting, not just the content, as central to credibility. These patterns illustrate how generational, regional, and educational factors work together to influence trust hierarchies.

The Independence Paradox

Media independence emerged as a near-universal aspiration, yet participants simultaneously acknowledged it as unattainable. "We don't have such a thing here," admitted one after naming supposedly independent outlets. Different groups adapted to this paradox in distinct ways: youth turned to international or digital sources to escape partisanship; elderly participants accepted bias as inevitable, triangulating among outlets to approximate truth; professionals adopted a nuanced approach, distinguishing between complete independence (impossible) and relative independence (valuable).

> **"There is no independent outlet."**
>
> – Respondent from the North Group

Trust often resided in individual journalists' integrity rather than in the institution itself, reflecting a personalization of credibility in contexts of systemic distrust. Accordingly, many respondents identified specific journalists or programs maintaining editorial integrity within politically affiliated outlets.

Factors Generating Distrust

Political Bias and Sensationalism

Perceived bias against one's community was the most potent source of distrust, experienced not as mere disagreement but as existential threat. Bekaa participants described MTV's perceived celebration of their losses as permanently disqualifying. Across groups, participants preferred open partisanship to false neutrality, while youth resented "theater-like" reporting designed to "create chaos." Overstatement further eroded credibility, though tolerance varied. Youth recognized it as a deliberate business model, indicating that media outlets are treating the news "like a commercial advertisement to make their page stronger." Elderly participants viewed exaggeration as inevitable, while lower-income groups simultaneously criticized it, yet relied on dramatic tone as an indicator of importance.

Speed–Accuracy Trade-offs and Transparency

Information priorities revealed how structural inequality shapes epistemic behavior in Lebanon's media landscape. In the South, the premium placed on speed reflected life under constant risk, where immediacy outweighed accuracy in the hierarchy of needs: information as survival rather than knowledge. For professionals in safer settings, accuracy became a moral and cognitive privilege, with verification framed as a sign of responsibility and discernment. Youth often navigated between these extremes, adopting a pragmatic "dual-track" approach that balanced urgency with selective trust.

Similarly, expectations of transparency exposed class-based divisions in informational literacy. Educated participants demanded sourcing and cross-verification, reflecting learned norms of accountability, while less-educated groups substituted institutional reputation for procedural trust. WhatsApp forwards, circulated without attribution, symbolized this asymmetry: for some participants, they were a symptom of informational complexity, where the flood of fragmented and conflicting messages makes verification difficult and uncertainty a constant feature of news consumption. For others, they were a normalized, communal mode of communication, a practical and socially grounded way to share and verify information in a low-trust environment.

Key Takeaway

Ultimately, the erosion of media trust mirrors Lebanon's wider institutional collapse. The media, like the government and banks, is now seen as a failed institution to navigate rather than believe. In response, Lebanese audiences have become their own editors, fact-checkers, and analysts, piecing together fragments of truth in a constant effort to verify information. Trust, in this environment, no longer represents confidence in sources but a necessary strategy for coping with uncertainty.

INDEPENDENT VS. TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Defining "Independent Media": A Conceptual Crisis

FGDs revealed that "independence" in Lebanon is less a fixed category than a contested perception shaped by disillusionment with partisanship. Participants used the term fluidly: sometimes to describe small online creators, other times to mean "less biased" traditional outlets, or even informal WhatsApp groups.

This conceptual ambiguity underscores a sector-wide identity crisis: independence has become synonymous with distance from politics rather than editorial autonomy.

"How did they start their business? Who is funding them? Who supported them?"

– Respondent from the North Group referring to independent media outlets

Generational and educational divides reinforced this tension. Youth equated independence with authenticity and individual voice, valuing creators who "speak freely" on social media, while educated professionals anchored it in ownership and funding structures. Yet

both ultimately shared the same conclusion: true independence was aspirational, not observable. Regional variations confirmed that credibility still hinges on alignment and local resonance rather than structural impartiality.

Recognition and Awareness Crisis

**"Did you ever hear of Megaphone? No.
Daraj media? No.
Raseef 22? No.
Naqd? No."**

– Respondent from the Mount Lebanon Group

The lack of public awareness of Lebanon's flagship independent outlets, such as Megaphone, Raseef22, and Daraj, reflects a disconnect between international acclaim and domestic reach. For most participants, these platforms were invisible, unknown, or perceived as elitist. Instead, popular WhatsApp aggregators and local pages like *Bint Jbeil* and *961 News* filled the space of "independent" information. Only highly educated professionals displayed real awareness, but even among them, recognition rarely translated into consistent engagement.

This substitution reveals a deeper shift: independence is no longer defined by journalistic governance but by perceived proximity, news that feels accessible, informal, and unfiltered. Independence, in effect, is being redefined through audience experience rather than professional ethics.

Perceived Differences from Traditional Media

Speed Versus Credibility

When contrasting independent and traditional media, participants emphasized function, such as speed, accessibility, and relevance, over editorial principles. Accordingly, independent outlets were valued for immediacy ("they post first"), but their speed also undermined credibility, particularly in high-stakes contexts. Women and caregivers prioritized actionable, safety-related information over political depth, while others described a pragmatic trade-off between "knowing now" and "knowing accurately."

"They just share the flash news and that's it."

– Respondent from the Socio-economically Disadvantaged Group

Format and Editorial Differences

Format also defined perceptions. Youth praised independent media's brevity and accessibility, contrasting sharply with older participants who showed opposite preferences, finding traditional media's structured formats more trustworthy and comprehensible. Participants identified significant editorial differences between independent and traditional outlets, though evaluations varied dramatically. Supporters praised independent media's willingness to "talk about everybody" and cover stories that traditional outlets ignore, appreciating coverage of marginalized voices and

sensitive topics. Critics, however, questioned whether editorial differences reflected independence or simply different biases. The sentiment was echoed across most groups, stating that "Each person who funds something has a purpose."

"Two words are enough to deliver the message."

– Respondent from the Beirut Group

Regional differences reinforced this skepticism, with Southern audiences valuing local conflict coverage above all else, regardless of structural ownership.

Challenges Facing Independent Media

The Funding Paradox

Funding emerged as the core paradox of independence: any source of support was assumed to compromise neutrality. This reflects a broader collapse of confidence in the financial viability of integrity itself. Participants viewed all money, foreign or domestic, as politically tainted, suggesting that credibility and sustainability are perceived as mutually exclusive.

Different demographics proposed different solutions to this paradox, all problematic:

- Youth participants suggested advertising and social media monetization, though recognizing these create new dependencies.
- Professionals proposed subscription models, acknowledging most Lebanese couldn't afford them.
- Disadvantaged participants saw no solution, viewing the funding challenge as proof that true independence is impossible.

Professional and Political Constraints

Professional disparities also shaped perceptions. Independent outlets were respected for authenticity but criticized for lacking resources, infrastructure, and investigative depth. While youth framed small-scale production as "real," others equated professionalism with institutional capacity, like research teams, studios, and consistent branding.

Political pressure was sensed more than seen, with vague references to censorship, account bans, and "unseen hands" limiting speech. Traditional outlets were sometimes accused of actively undermining independent competitors, with one participant from the socio-economically disadvantaged group noting: "Traditional media might create fake accounts to hack their pages."

"Independent Media is a bit more objective. Traditional Media tells you what the party wants."

– Respondent from the High-Education Professionals Group

Sectarian pressures appeared particularly acute. Participants described instances where outlets faced community backlash for content perceived as hostile or misaligned with group narratives. Bekaa participants mentioned that some WhatsApp groups "that talk a lot about the 'Resistance' and Hezbollah are banned," illustrating platform-level suppression of certain perspectives.

Northern participants, meanwhile, described a different set of challenges. Independent outlets covering their region often encountered both national skepticism and local political sensitivities. "They might harm some politicians maybe," one participant explained, reflecting the risks of reporting on local power structures.

Sustainability and Societal Relevance

Crisis Dependence

"It's the season now! There's a war, and people are interested."

– Respondent from the Bekaa Group

Participants widely agreed that independent media thrives in crisis but struggles to sustain attention otherwise. Some saw this as natural, arguing that the media is adapting to societal needs. Others, mainly among the elderly, viewed it as proof of the independent media's fundamental unsustainability, lacking traditional media's diverse content that survives beyond crisis periods.

"Once the current situation changes, they [independent media outlets] will disappear."

– Respondent from the Elderly Group

Generational Transition

Generational change may reshape this dynamic. Youth audiences already consume news through decentralized channels, while older generations still anchor legitimacy in legacy brands. Rather than outright replacement, many envisioned coexistence: traditional media maintaining reach and structure, and independent outlets driving immediacy and discourse innovation.

Ultimately, the sustainability of independent media reflects broader national uncertainty. Its future depends not only on audience behavior but also on Lebanon's political and economic trajectory. Still, the appetite for alternatives to partisan news remains undeniable. Even if today's platforms fail, the expectation of independence has taken root, altering how Lebanese audiences think about truth, bias, and their right to information.

Key Takeaway

In Lebanon, "independent media" has become a fluid, contested idea, valued for its distance from politics rather than its editorial autonomy. Most audiences equate independence with authenticity and accessibility, often trusting informal platforms over recognized outlets. The 2023–2024 conflict revealed this fragility, as independence became functional: trusted when useful, doubted when politicized. Despite funding and credibility challenges, a lasting shift is clear: Lebanese audiences now expect alternatives to partisan media, redefining what independence means.

V. CONTENT TESTING FINDINGS

The following section summarizes audience reactions to the six tested content pieces, which were presented without disclosing the publishing outlet. Each subsection traces how participants recognized, evaluated, and engaged with the content, highlighting variations by geography, gender, and socio-economic background.

ARTICLE 1: LITANI RIVER POLLUTION[14]

Recognition Without Exposure

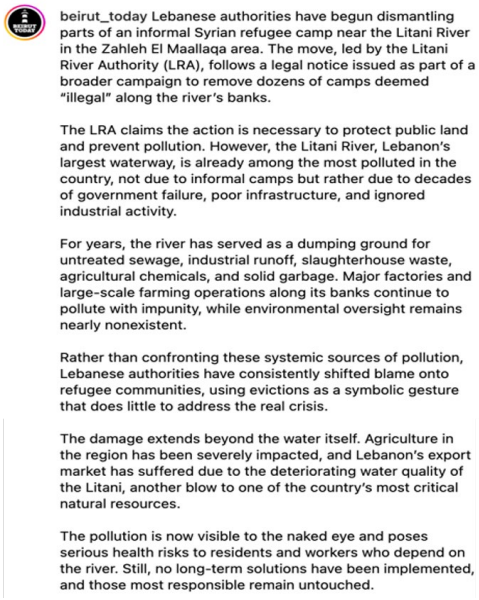
Reactions to the Litani River article illustrate the persistence of collective environmental awareness without mediated exposure. Participants had not encountered the article itself, yet the issue's notoriety rendered it instantly recognizable, suggesting that chronic crises persist in social memory even when they are no longer recent in the media cycle. And while respondents were familiar with the issue addressed by the article, they were unable to identify which outlet had published the content. Geographic proximity shaped not only knowledge but authority: Bekaa and Southern participants spoke from lived evidence, positioning themselves as primary witnesses, while Beirut residents operated through second-hand, symbolic awareness.

Credibility through Lived Experience

Credibility was not earned through institutional trust but through embodied verification. Those living near the river validated the article by aligning it with sensory experience ("I've seen it with my own eyes") and material consequences. For urban professionals, credibility emerged from the article's analytical framing, valuing complexity over populist blame. That said, respondents emphasized that the article's credibility stemmed not only from their firsthand experience witnessing the pollution in the

14 Beirut Today. "*Refugee Camp Dismantled Along the Litani — Who Is the Real Polluter?*" Instagram, June 26, 2025.

Litani River, but also from their lack of trust and hope in the Lebanese government's ability to take action. Participants consistently linked credibility to their own encounters with state institutions, describing these interactions as ineffective and unprofessional. Together, these reactions highlight that in contexts of institutional failure, personal experience becomes the gold standard of truth.


beirut_today Lebanese authorities have begun dismantling parts of an informal Syrian refugee camp near the Litani River in the Zahleh El Maallaqa area. The move, led by the Litani River Authority (LRA), follows a legal notice issued as part of a broader campaign to remove dozens of camps deemed "illegal" along the river's banks.

The LRA claims the action is necessary to protect public land and prevent pollution. However, the Litani River, Lebanon's largest waterway, is already among the most polluted in the country, not due to informal camps but rather due to decades of government failure, poor infrastructure, and ignored industrial activity.

For years, the river has served as a dumping ground for untreated sewage, industrial runoff, slaughterhouse waste, agricultural chemicals, and solid garbage. Major factories and large-scale farming operations along its banks continue to pollute with impunity, while environmental oversight remains nearly nonexistent.

Rather than confronting these systemic sources of pollution, Lebanese authorities have consistently shifted blame onto refugee communities, using evictions as a symbolic gesture that does little to address the real crisis.

The damage extends beyond the water itself. Agriculture in the region has been severely impacted, and Lebanon's export market has suffered due to the deteriorating water quality of the Litani, another blow to one of the country's most critical natural resources.

The pollution is now visible to the naked eye and poses serious health risks to residents and workers who depend on the river. Still, no long-term solutions have been implemented, and those most responsible remain untouched.

The Contentious Frame of Blame

Reactions to the article's refugee framing revealed how environmental discourse becomes a proxy for social tension. Bekaa participants rejected the scapegoating of refugee camps, defending localized realities, while others endorsed exclusionary framings. The quotation marks around "illegal camps" became a semiotic battleground, read by some as critique, by others as hidden endorsement. The English-language presentation deepened mistrust, viewed as an "externalized gaze" on domestic problems.

Format and Sharing Barriers

Engagement was constrained less by disbelief than by form and fatigue. Educational divides determined accessibility: professionals praised design clarity, while less-educated participants dismissed it as linguistically and cognitively distant. Youth demanded visual translation, stating "the video is more interactive," and signaling, in turn, an attention economy where format equals inclusion. In today's fast, visually driven media environment, long written articles often exclude audiences who prefer quick, visual content, while videos make information easier to access and share, especially for younger people. Despite acknowledging credibility, the majority of participants expressed profound reluctance to share, reflecting widespread disillusionment: "We have tried that but in vain."

The Missing Solution Imperative

Across demographics, engagement collapsed around the absence of solutions. The article's failure to move from diagnosis to remediation underscored the crisis of efficacy defining Lebanese public discourse: "Everyone knows about the issue. A solution matters most." The demand for actionable content, like scientific rigor among professionals, and awareness campaigns among others, reveals a shared frustration with repetitive exposure to unresolved crises. The suggestion to reframe the issue around health impacts ("focus on cancer cases") illustrates a latent desire to re-politicize environmental harm through human consequence, bridging moral urgency and communicative impact.

ARTICLE 2: AUDI BANK FINANCIAL SCANDAL[15]

Recognition Without Familiarity

The Audi Bank article revealed scandal fatigue within collective awareness: participants had not read this specific piece, were unaware of the outlet that had published the article but immediately recognized its subject as part of Lebanon's ongoing corruption challenges. Statements like "We know that Riad Salameh is a thief, Mikati as well" reflect how corruption has shifted from revelation to routine. Among youth, detailed recall of figures and schemes demonstrated how the financial collapse has become a formative civic trauma, shaping political literacy. Elderly participants, by contrast, voiced resigned familiarity through years of repetitive coverage without resolution.

يكشف هذا التحقيق، الذي يستند إلى الحسابات المالية الواردة في التقارير السنوية لبنك عودة من العام 2012 حتى العام 2020، بالإضافة إلى تقرير شركة "ألفاريز ومارسال" للتدقيق المالي، عن استفادة بنك عودة، من هندسات مالية عدّة قام بها مصرف لبنان، سمحت له بتحقيق أرباح لا تقلّ عن 3.1 مليار دولار بين 2016 و2020، أي في السنوات التي أدّت إلى الانهيار المالي واحتجاز أموال المودعين.

في شهر نيسان/ أبريل من العام 2019، أي قبل أشهر قليلة من الانهيار المالي في تشرين الأول/ أكتوبر من العام نفسه، وزّع بنك عودة أكثر من 260 مليون دولار على أصحاب الأسهم لديه، من بينهم نجيب ميقاتي ورياض سلامة ومساهمون آخرون. استفاد بنك عودة بطريقة مباشرة من الهندسات المالية وتسهيلات من مصرف لبنان، بما فيها دين بأكثر من ملياري دولار، بينما كان المودعون اللبنانيون يحصلون على فتات ودائعهم المحجوزة في المصارف اللبنانية.

Credibility through Lived Experience

People trusted the story because it spoke to their own experiences and sense of right and wrong, not because it came from a particular media outlet. For affluent participants, the scandal was made real through restricted bank withdrawals and vanished savings; for rural poor, it remained symbolically true but materially distant: "He took 3 billion dollars, and I haven't received a penny." Professionals emphasized data precision yet questioned verification, illustrating an elite paradox: "What if the number is not accurate?"

Professional Presentation, Unequal Access

Reactions to presentation exposed how financial literacy and linguistic accessibility structure informational inclusion. Educated participants praised the article's organized sequencing and use of quantitative data, reading professionalism as legitimacy. Less-educated audiences, alienated by technical language, experienced exclusion from the very narratives describing their economic dispossession. The tension extended to editorial stance, with Northern participants praising neutrality, stating: "They didn't express their point of view at all". Southern participants, on the other hand, wanted explicit condemnation: "They should write in the title: The most prominent scammers."

15 Daraj. "*More Than 3 Billion Dollars in Profit for Bank Audi from Central Bank of Lebanon's Financial Engineering: Biggest Profiteers Include Salameh and Mikati.*" May 1, 2025.

Visual Recognition as Credibility

Images of Salameh and Mikati served as visual shorthand for corruption, triggering instant recognition that bypassed textual engagement. For many, the photographs themselves sufficed as evidence. A statement like "Salameh's photo is more than enough!" exemplifies how, in visual cultures of distrust[16], image replaces investigation. Educated participants engaged more critically, analyzing design and framing, yet even they acknowledged the emotive power of visual cues. The "3 billion dollars" headline functioned as a unifying symbol demonstrating how numerical spectacle sustains attention amid informational fatigue.

Across groups, respondents noted that constant exposure to corruption stories has led to exhaustion and disengagement rather than curiosity. Older participants, in particular, described being "tired of hearing the same thing" and said they no longer read such articles because "nothing changes."

Sharing Blocked by Learned Helplessness

Patterns of (non-)sharing revealed a collective paralysis born of repeated betrayal. While affected individuals expressed desire to "make it known," widespread cynicism undercut action: "What is lost is lost." The ongoing failure to address scandals has normalized corruption, turning public attention into passive observation rather than engagement.

Among the rural poor, disengagement was pragmatic: elite corruption felt irrelevant to those who do not have bank accounts, reflecting a double exclusion from both financial and justice systems.

Converging Demands, Divergent Needs

Despite divergent interpretations, participants converged on pragmatic expectations: clearer sourcing, simpler language, and visible accountability.

Accordingly, the desire for accountability transcended demographics, though expressions varied. Elite participants wanted detailed investigation, and the need of "showing where the money has gone", while working-class participants sought simple justice to be more pronounced. This convergence on accountability despite divergent sophistication levels suggests that independent media could unite fractured audiences through sustained justice-focused coverage.

The Audi Bank content highlighted how demographic fractures shape reception: wealth influences how personally people are affected, education affects comprehension, and geography influences relevance. While the scandal's recognition suggests shared national trauma, varied reception patterns reveal that independent media must serve multiple audiences simultaneously, each having their own needs and expectations when they encounter financial corruption coverage.

16 Mirzoeff, N. (2009). *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed., London, Routledge.

ARTICLE 3: TRUMP'S PLAN FOR SOUTH LEBANON[17]

Recognition Without Understanding

Audience interaction with the Trump article reflected fragmented awareness and limited comprehension. The visual design triggered immediate MTV association among several participants across all focus group discussions. "This is the same design as on MTV," noted a Beirut participant, recognizing stylistic elements before content. This channel identification shaped initial reactions, with participants' existing MTV perceptions influencing credibility assessments before reading began.

Credibility Contested by Political Reality

The article's premise was rejected, as it conflicted with participants' lived political understanding: Trump's alignment with Israel rendered any notion of "benefits" to South Lebanon implausible. In this sense, credibility was inversely proportional to recognizability: the more recognizable the actor (Trump), the less believable the message. This sentiment was consistently echoed by several participants across all focus groups, with participants dismissing the idea that Trump could bring any benefit to the people of the South. Visual contradictions intensified this effect. Accordingly, images of dollars imposed over destruction symbolized exploitation rather than aid, triggering anger and ridicule, especially among women who saw the imagery as mockery.

The "Benefits" That Backfire

The term "benefits" functioned as a rhetorical provocation, not an invitation to believe. Participants inverted its meaning, interpreting it as a sign of deceit, manipulation, or threat. The audience's proposed alternatives ("damages," "plan without benefits") revealed active resistance to perceived framing bias.

Shareability Blocked by Shame

Sharing intentions were non-existent and were equated with complicity or gullibility: "People would make fun of us." Pro-Hezbollah participants wouldn't legitimize enemy narratives; opponents wouldn't share obvious propaganda. In effect, reputational risk replaced political disagreement as the dominant deterrent to dissemination.

17 MTV Lebanon News. "فوائد كثيرة لخطّة ترامب للجنوب لبنان... هل يقبل بها لبنان؟" Instagram, August 27, 2025.

Demographic Variations in Rejection

Though rejection was widespread, its expression mirrored participants' standpoints. For Southern and Bekaa residents, emotional indignation was grounded in lived conflict and a sense of historical abandonment. Urban participants responded through analytical detachment, identifying clickbait mechanisms rather than ideological offense. Women across groups uniquely focused on the visual mockery of suffering, interpreting floating dollars as an insult to displacement and destruction. .

ARTICLE 4: HEZBOLLAH'S WEAPONS AND NAWAF SALAM[18]

Familiar Territory, Fresh Exhaustion

In stark contrast to the Trump piece's shock value, this article elicited cognitive and emotional exhaustion. Respondents across all groups were unable to identify the outlet that had posted this piece in particular. Participants approached the topic as a repetitive fixture of Lebanese discourse, flagging repeated coverage of Hezbollah's weapons and the ongoing tensions with the authorities. "We have come across lots of similar topics," sighed an elderly participant, while youth noted, "It's a trend that you can see everywhere." This overexposure bred disengagement before reading even began. The content was processed through pre-existing scripts rather than new information, revealing a saturation point where repetition undermines attention and trust.

سلاح حزب الله ونوّاف سلام
بناء شرعية نظام مهترئ

الخطة الحكوميّة بين رفضَيْن

تتّجه الأنظار إلى جلسة مجلس الوزراء يوم الجمعة القادم، حيث تعدّ اختباراً لقدرة الحكومة على الاستمرار بخطة حصر السلاح في يد الدولة، في مواجهة ضغوط الثنائي الشيعي بعد فشل الاتصالات السياسية تحقيق أي توافق أو نقاط مشتركة، ومع تجدّد الاعتداءات الإسرائيلية في الجنوب وليس آخرها على جنود اليونيفيل.

الخطة الحكومية المسرّبة والمطروحة بصيغ متناسقة في الإدارة الأميركية وبعض العواصم الأوروبية والعربية، تقوم على مقايضة صريحة: **سلاح الحزب مقابل انسحاب إسرائيلي وضمانات أمنية وتمويل لإعادة الإعمار**. أمّا التنفيذ، فيفترض أن يكون تصاعديًا: تعزيز انتشار الجيش في الجنوب، والسماح له بتنفيذ مهام حسّاسة لنزع الصواريخ والمخازن التابعة لحزب الله، ثم مسار تفاوضي مع الإسرائيليين لانسحابهم من الأراضي اللبنانية، وصولاً إلى نهاية العام كموعد شكلي لإنهاء الملف.

لكنّ الخطة تواجه **رفض الطرفين المعنيّين بها**، من جهة تعنت الثنائي الشيعي، ومن جهة أخرى، تشدّد الموقف الإسرائيلي. في وجه هذا الرفض المزدوج، تبدو وعود الحكومة، حيال قدرتها على ضبط الحدود واستعادة قرار الحرب والسلم وإنقاذ ما يمكن إنقاذه من اقتصاد منهك ومتعثر، وعوداً بعيدة المنوال. إذ أن تركيبة هذا النظام الطائفي، متفشية ومتجذرة، ولا يبدو أن هذا العهد الجديد الذي وعد بالإصلاحات له أي قدرة فعلية على الأرض للقيام بذلك أو بفرض مقايضة على أطراف أقوى منه عسكريًا. النوايا لا تبني سياسة ولا نتائج ملموسة.

Perceived Predictability of Politics

Paradoxically, the article's believability derived from resignation, not persuasion. "It's true because this always happens" captures a collective fatalism in which credibility stems from the predictability of political behavior rather than factual validation. This "inevitable truth effect" transformed the article into confirmation rather than communication. However, this recognition also carried cynicism: many viewed the framing as selectively critical, stating that "He mentioned the stubbornness of the Shiite Duo. He didn't mention the stubbornness of Israel too." This sentiment was echoed particularly among highly educated professionals, participants from the South, and members of the elderly group.

18 Ayoub, S. "سلاح حزب الله ونواف سلام: بناء شرعية نظام مهترئ؟" *Megaphone News*, September 5, 2025.

Professional Presentation, Polarized Reception

The article's formal tone and structure invited respect yet failed to bridge polarization. As one participant from the South explained, "The story told in this article is regular. It doesn't harm anyone. It doesn't humiliate anyone." Another respondent from the Bekaa region added, "He's not biased; he's saying the truth. What the state has done and what it's doing: nothing!" Critics saw the same tone as manipulative: "The writer's leading to strife." The only unifying feedback was aesthetic fatigue, where length and density discouraged reading altogether.

Selective Sharing Along Sectarian Lines

Digital engagement followed sectarian logic rather than informational merit. Supporters of Hezbollah circulated the article within echo chambers as a gesture of internal affirmation, with one respondent stating: "*This article talks about us. So, we share it.*" On the other hand, opponents refused to share it at all to avoid tensions and due to the length of the article: "*I don't like to discuss or to quarrel with anyone over any political topic.*"

Youth identified the title as a barrier, suggesting neutral framings like "an agreement between Hezbollah and Nawaf Salam" to avoid triggering sectarian responses.

ARTICLE 5: CONSTITUTION AND RESISTANCE WEAPONS[19]

Recognition through Political Echo Chambers

Participants across all groups were unable to identify the outlet that had published the article. And while they hadn't read the piece, they responded as though they had, reproducing rehearsed talking points that reflect deep political conditioning rather than informational processing. The topic of the "resistance" weapons, when framed through constitutional language, no longer operates as news but as ideological reinforcement: an exercise in affirming known positions rather than seeking understanding.

هل يوجب الدستور نزع سلاح المقاومة؟

مبدأ مقاومة الاحتلال الإسرائيلي لأجزاء من جنوب لبنان بكل الوسائل المتاحة لا يخرج عن الدستور كما يكرر البعض، بل يُفترض أن تكون المقاومة واجباً وطنياً. إذ لا يجوز، بأي حال من الأحوال، «التخلّي عن أحد أقسام الأراضي اللبنانية أو التنازل عنها» (المادة الثانية من الدستور). ومن واجب السلطة الإجرائية، السياسية والعسكرية، تحرير الأرض بكل الوسائل المتاحة، بما في ذلك القوة إذا اقتضى الأمر.

لكن، إذا تمنّعت السلطة عن ذلك لأي سبب كان، أو إذا عجز الجيش اللبناني عن القيام بذلك بسبب نقص في الموارد والسلاح والقدرات العسكرية، فلا مانع دستورياً من مشاركة الشعب في مواجهة المحتلّ، لا بل من واجب اللبنانيين تحرير بلادهم من الاحتلال بكل الوسائل المتاحة.

إن تحديد عدم جواز التنازل عن شبر من الأراضي اللبنانية في الفصل الأول من الدستور، أي قبل تحديد هيكلية الدولة وصلاحيات السلطات، يضع هذا الواجب في أعلى سلّم الأولويات الوطنية والدستورية. وبالتالي، فإن قيام الدولة بنزع السلاح من الشعب الذي يقاوم المحتلّ من دون تسليح الجيش وتزويده بالقدرات التي تتيح له مواجهة المحتلّ ومن دون وجود ضمانات أكيدة وجدول زمني لانسحاب المحتل من «أحد أقسام الأراضي اللبنانية»، يُعد تخلّياً أو تنازلاً عن أراضٍ لبنانية، وبالتالي خرقاً جسيماً للدستور.

19 Nachabé, O. هل يوجب الدستور نزع سلاح المقاومة؟ , *Al-Akhbar*, September 2, 2025.

Youth showed particular disengagement: "I feel that these articles are not for us... the big politicians can't solve this issue." Additionally, the article's identification with partisan media occurred instantly, with one participant mentioning: "This article is surely from Al Manar."

Legal Framing, Sectarian Reading

The article's legal framing gave it surface legitimacy yet failed to create interpretive movement, as it did not prompt readers to reconsider or expand their understanding of the issue beyond their existing positions. Supporters of Hezbollah treated constitutional references as validation of their worldview, while opponents dismissed them as selective and manipulative. Credibility thus depended not on textual integrity but on alignment with pre-existing positions.

After reviewing both the Nawaf Salam article and this one, women participants voiced deep skepticism toward any discussion surrounding Hezbollah's weapons, expressing doubt that real solutions or implementation were possible, regardless of whether such arguments were grounded in the constitution or not. As such, women dismissed the framework as political theater: "There is nothing on the ground; only talks."

Professional Presentation, Partisan Reception

Stylistically, the piece reflected journalistic discipline, structured, coherent, and formal; yet this very professionalism reinforced its inaccessibility. The complex Arabic, the absence of visuals, and rhetorical gravity alienated younger audiences, who perceived it as elitist and demanded further multimedia content.

Sharing Paralyzed by Political Fatigue

Reactions to sharing revealed the social consequences of polarization: audiences censor themselves not out of apathy but out of fatigue. "I don't want to argue" was not indifference but a defense mechanism against endless repetition. In a context where political speech risks personal tension, silence becomes the only remaining strategy of coexistence.

ARTICLE 6: ROUMIEH PRISON DOCUMENTARY[20]

Unknown Content, Familiar Injustice

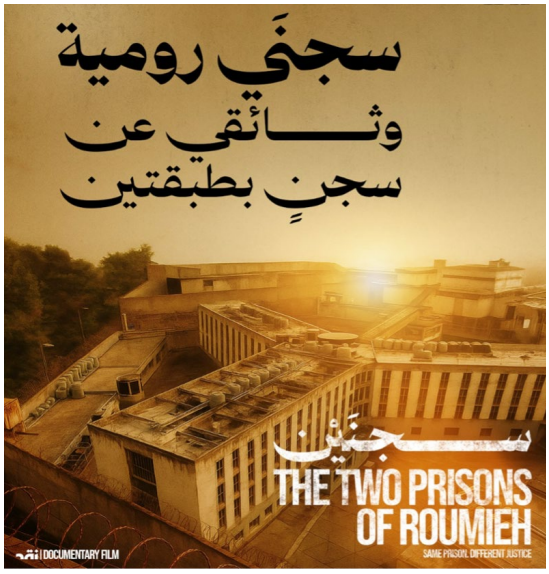
The Roumieh Prison poster achieved zero recognition yet generated immediate topic familiarity. Accordingly, none of the respondents were able to recognize the media outlet that had published the article. "Not the same one, but we come across lots of similar contents," noted participants.

The Self-Evident Truth

Unlike divisive political content, the documentary achieved widespread credibility. "It's credible. 100% credible," declared all participants unanimously. Participants didn't need verification; the reality of overcrowding and abuse was self-evident. The figure "3,000 prisoners in a space for 1,000" functioned less as data than as confirmation of a widely recognized social reality. Accordingly, working-class participants, specifically from the elderly and North Lebanon groups, knew prisoners in facilities who had suffered during their time in prison and had even passed away due to a lack of access to basic needs such as healthcare. Trust here emerged not from source authority but from emotional and social consensus.

Emotional Humanitarian Framing

The documentary's success lay in its humanitarian framing, which reactivated empathy where political content breeds fatigue. Viewers described it as "emotional" and "touching," demonstrating that affective resonance restored a sense of civic engagement absent from partisan discourse. Even when visuals were questioned for tone, they succeeded in making suffering legible without politicization. Accordingly, visual design drew mixed responses, with sunset imagery creating appeal while some questioned appropriateness for harsh topics. The title's ambiguity intrigued, suggesting class divisions within incarceration.



20 تحقيق استقصائي عن سجن بطبقتين. *Naqd Media*, August 31, 2025.

High Shareability Through Humanitarian Appeal

In a fragmented media landscape, the Roumieh piece uniquely transcended sectarian and class barriers. Sharing it was seen as a moral duty rather than a political stance, with respondents noting "I would send it to someone who has a prisoner." The non-political nature enabled cross-sectarian sharing without social risk, achieving what political content couldn't.

The Power of Humanitarian Versus Political Framing

The Roumieh documentary's reception exposes a crucial insight: in a society exhausted by partisanship, moral clarity drives credibility. Where the constitutional debate alienated through abstraction, the prison story unified through humanity. The same youth who dismissed political articles as "not for us" re-engaged when injustice was framed as collective, not factional. .

CROSS-CUTTING ANALYSIS

The content testing revealed clear and consistent patterns that transcend individual articles, offering a deeper understanding of how Lebanese audiences engage with independent media content in the current information landscape.

Across topics, participants demonstrated high issue awareness but low exposure to the tested materials, reflecting an environment saturated with information yet limited in trusted, accessible, and actionable content. This pattern illustrates both the fragmented nature of content dissemination and the audience's selective attention shaped by fatigue and algorithmic filtering.

Credibility Rooted in Lived Experience

Credibility consistently stemmed from personal experience rather than institutional trust. Participants validated environmental and economic stories through direct observation ("I have seen it with my own eyes") or tangible consequences. In contrast, political and foreign affairs pieces, those seemingly disconnected from lived realities, were met with skepticism or rejection. This reinforces a critical insight: audiences trust information that resonates with their daily lives or community experiences, not abstract or elite-driven narratives. However, politically affiliated participants represented a notable exception, showing strong emotional attachment and trust toward outlets or narratives aligned with their party or sectarian identity.

Emotional Engagement vs. Political Exhaustion

Humanitarian and social justice topics, such as the Roumieh Prison documentary, generated empathy, discussion, and willingness to share across sectarian and class divides. In contrast, politically charged

content triggered fatigue, avoidance, and defensive reactions. This dichotomy reflects a broader shift from civic engagement to emotional engagement: people respond to what moves them, not what divides them. Participants expressed strong aversion to "political quarrels" and instead valued content that humanizes rather than polarizes.

The Futility Barrier

Even when participants accepted the credibility and importance of information, they rarely acted on it. Across environmental and corruption topics, many expressed learned helplessness: a belief that sharing or discussing such content "won't change anything." Years of unaddressed crises have created audiences that are informed but disempowered, consuming evidence of dysfunction without expectation of resolution. This sense of futility represents one of the strongest barriers to media impact identified in the study.

Format and Language Accessibility

Educational and linguistic divides significantly shaped engagement. Arabic-language accessibility and concise formats were key to comprehension and interest. English-language articles were perceived as "elitist" or "not for everyone," while lengthy texts discouraged reading altogether. Visual and video-based content, by contrast, increased curiosity and comprehension, particularly among youth. This underscores the need for multi-format storytelling, integrating brevity, visuals, and Arabic translation, to ensure inclusivity across audiences.

Visual design served as both an entry point and a credibility signal. Recognizable figures or evocative imagery heightened engagement, while misaligned visuals, such as overly stylized representations of suffering, undermined trust. Participants across demographics favored authentic visuals tied to lived realities.

Engagement Across Demographics

Demographic contrasts revealed layered audience needs.

- Youth sought visual, fast-paced, and emotionally resonant content but avoided overtly political topics.
- Educated professionals valued analytical depth and credible sourcing but demanded greater simplicity and relevance.
- Women favored content that offered practical implications or protective knowledge.
- Lower-income participants prioritized local relevance and tangible impact over systemic explanations.

This segmentation highlights the need for diversified content strategies, balancing analytic rigor with accessibility and emotional resonance.

The Power of Humanitarian Framing

Perhaps the clearest insight emerges from the comparison between political and humanitarian stories. While political content reproduced divisions, humanitarian narratives, such as prison conditions, achieved rare consensus and high shareability. This suggests that shared human experience can transcend Lebanon's entrenched polarization. Independent media's most effective path to rebuilding trust may therefore lie in shifting from adversarial politics to empathetic storytelling rooted in social reality.

Key Takeaway

Across all articles, audiences demonstrated intelligence, awareness, and critical engagement with media, yet expressed exhaustion, disillusionment, and deep distrust toward institutions and media alike. They navigate the information ecosystem with caution, constantly verifying, comparing, and filtering through personal networks. For independent media, the challenge is therefore not simply to inform, but to reignite relevance, by producing credible, human-centered, and emotionally resonant content that connects truth to lived experience and transforms awareness into engagement.

VI. WEBSITE HOMEPAGE TESTING FINDINGS

The following section summarizes audience reactions to six tested website homepages: Beirut Today[21], Daraj[22], Megaphone[23], Naqd Media[24], in addition to MTV[25] and Al-Akhbar[26]. The last two outlets' homepages were added to illustrate how participants perceive and interact with traditional, legacy media in constrast to independent digital-native outlets.

The website homepage evaluations revealed clear contrasts in how audiences perceive, navigate, and infer credibility from digital media design and content presentation. Across all demographics, participants judged outlets not only by reputation but also by visual and structural cues, with design functioning as a proxy for trustworthiness. Yet reactions also exposed deep-seated fatigue toward politicized narratives, linguistic divides, and generational gaps in digital engagement.

Recognition and Preconceptions

Familiarity strongly shaped interpretation. Established outlets such as MTV and Al-Akhbar carried heavy political and sectarian baggage, with participants' reactions determined less by what they saw than by what they already believed. Independent or lesser-known outlets (Beirut Today, Megaphone, Naqd, and Daraj) benefited from initial neutrality but struggled to convert curiosity into credibility, often due to presentation or language barriers. This dynamic confirmed that legacy media face perception rigidity, while new media battle invisibility.

Megaphone, for example, illustrated independent media's no-win situation: independent outlets need extraordinary design to earn attention, yet that same polish triggers suspicion about funding sources. Multiple groups demanded journalist bylines for credibility, while simultaneously questioning how unknown outlets afforded professional presentation. This impossible standard reveals why new independent outlets struggle against established brands carrying decades of accumulated, if contested, legitimacy.

21 Beirut Today Homepage
22 Daraj Media Homepage
23 Megaphone Homepage
24 Naqd Media Homepage
25 MTV Homepage.
26 Al-Akhbar Homepage.

Design as a Marker of Credibility and Neutrality

Visual organization, color balance, and clarity emerged as the main indicators of professionalism. Websites perceived as clean, structured, and visually engaging, particularly Beirut Today and Al-Akhbar, were immediately associated with credibility. Conversely, cluttered or text-heavy layouts (Daraj, Naqd) were dismissed as "messy," "tiring," or "untrustworthy," regardless of content. Participants consistently equated photographic evidence, visible journalist names, and clear timestamps with reliability, underscoring how form substitutes for brand trust.

Beyond credibility, design also shaped perceptions of bias, with audiences increasingly equating neutrality with design rather than declared editorial independence. Beirut Today's colorful, magazine-like aesthetic was celebrated as "neutral" precisely because it avoided traditional news visuals associated with partisanship. In contrast, Daraj and Naqd's overtly political imagery and activist tone were seen as partisan even before reading content. This suggests that neutrality is not achieved through self-branding as "independent," but is aided through emotionally neutral, user-friendly visual design.

Engagement Fatigue and Selective Curiosity

Audiences expressed strong motivation to explore outlets perceived as offering variety and accessibility, such as how Beirut Today and Al-Akhbar's clear topic segmentation encouraged browsing. In contrast, overtly political or text-heavy websites discouraged engagement. Even youth, typically more digitally active, preferred visually dynamic yet informative structures. The preference for "short, easy, and diverse" content indicates a fatigue toward political saturation and a growing appetite for human-interest or constructive reporting.

Language and Accessibility Divides

English-dominant interfaces restricted accessibility, particularly among older and less-educated groups who either failed to locate the Arabic option or assumed it was unavailable. This divide was most evident with Beirut Today and Daraj. Participants across regions called for bilingual layouts integrating both Arabic and English headlines, a reflection of how linguistic inclusivity is now perceived as a marker of true audience orientation rather than cosmopolitan sophistication.

Transparency and the Trust Paradox

Attempts at financial or editorial transparency, as in Megaphone and Daraj's "support independent media" banners, backfired for many participants, who equated such calls with vulnerability or hidden agendas. "If they ask for donations, it means no one is funding them" summarized a widespread skepticism rooted in Lebanon's patronage-driven media culture. Ironically, the very features meant to communicate independence instead triggered doubts about legitimacy and sustainability.

The Limits of Digital Innovation for Legacy Media

MTV and Al-Akhbar highlighted divergent paths for established outlets. MTV's sophisticated design could not offset deep mistrust tied to its political identity, while Al-Akhbar's organized and journalist-focused presentation managed to instill credibility through professional design. These two cases exemplify a broader pattern observed across discussions: digital modernization can enhance perception, but it cannot erase historical alignment. In this view, legacy credibility remains inseparable from editorial pasts.

Independence as Provocation vs. Professionalism

Outlets like Naqd illustrated how framing independence through confrontational critique may alienate more than attract. Participants valued criticism but rejected hostility: "They make you tired just by reading the titles." Effective independence, as demonstrated by Beirut Today, was associated with calm professionalism, clear organization, and relevance to Lebanese daily life rather than regional or ideological battles.

Key Takeaway

The website testing revealed that in Lebanon's polarized media environment, design functions as the new currency of credibility. Audiences judged outlets less by reputation and more by clarity, neutrality, and visual balance. Clean, organized sites like Beirut Today and Al-Akhbar received praise, while cluttered or overtly political designs like Daraj and Naqd fueled skepticism. Language barriers and confrontational tones further alienated users. Ultimately, neutrality is now perceived as a visual and emotional quality, with audiences favoring calm, bilingual, and human-centered design over ideological messaging.

VII. EVOLUTION OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA PERCEPTION

From Post-Revolution Optimism to Deep Skepticism

The 2020 study captured a moment of intense political engagement after the October 17, 2019 uprising, when independent outlets like Megaphone and Legal Agenda symbolized moral clarity and defiance. Urban and anglophone youth viewed them as extensions of protest energy: credible because they stood against the sectarian establishment, not because of institutional maturity.

By 2024–2025, that moral trust has largely eroded. What was once political awakening has turned into "fatigue" and "helplessness." Independence no longer guarantees authenticity; credibility now depends on neutrality, clarity, and professional presentation. The anti-establishment tone that once inspired confidence is increasingly read as bias. Independence must be proven, through balanced coverage, sourcing, and design, reflecting a broader disillusionment as idealism gives way to pragmatic, non-provocative information seeking. This transformation is not only emotional but epistemic: it has changed how audiences define and verify credibility itself.

In 2020, credibility rested on shared moral consensus: participants trusted outlets that "stood with the people" against corruption. Verification was collective and social: truth was constructed through peer exchange on WhatsApp and cross-checking among trusted circles. By 2025, WhatsApp remains heavily used, but primarily as a channel for information circulation rather than verification. The collective logic has fractured into individualized trust strategies. Educated users verify through sourcing and platform triangulation, while lower-income and older groups depend on visible cues such as photos or lived experience. Visual evidence has replaced social consensus as the dominant credibility marker.

A defining difference between 2020 and 2025 lies in what audiences interpret as professionalism. In 2020, students praised informal, activist-driven content, valuing emotion, transparency, and colloquial Arabic as markers of sincerity. By 2025, audiences associate professionalism not with tone, but with design precision, linguistic simplicity, and visual balance. Participants across education levels linked professionalism to credibility, judging websites like Beirut Today or Al-Akhbar as credible primarily because of organized layouts, dated thumbnails, and journalistic bylines. Meanwhile, outlets like Daraj and Naqd suffer credibility loss due to cluttered design or overt editorial stance, regardless of content quality. For instance, while one respondent attributed the prison-related content to Naqd's website credibility, most participants viewed the post and the website as separate, trusting the individual story but not extending that trust to the outlet itself.

The post-2019 emotional engagement, fueled by outrage, protest, and moral identification, has largely dissipated. In its place is a pragmatic, consumption-based relationship with independent media. Participants express conditional trust, focus on tangible relevance (health, economy, education), and demand brevity and clarity. Video-based storytelling dominates attention spans, but primarily as a vehicle for utility rather than inspiration.

Demographic Fractures and the New Credibility Economy

The 2020 study already hinted at linguistic and geographic differences. By 2025, these divides have solidified into distinct information cultures. Educated urban audiences practice verification and platform-switching, treating independent outlets as complements to international media. Peripheral and lower-income groups, constrained by data costs and access, rely on WhatsApp and Facebook for news, trusting only what is locally relevant or visually self-evident. Age remains the strongest predictor of trust logic: elderly audiences retain symbolic attachment to television, while youth oscillate between skepticism and selective curiosity, valuing neutrality and aesthetics over activism.

Despite profound behavioral shifts, one continuity stands out: the persistent demand for truthfulness. In both 2020 and 2025, participants define credible media as that which "tells things as they are" and "doesn't belong to anyone." What has changed is the definition of independence: once a moral stance against power, it is now a stylistic and procedural one, embodied through professional design, verifiable facts, and balanced tone.

Key Takeaway

The evolution from 2020 to 2025 reflects Lebanon's broader trajectory from mobilization to resignation. Independent media have moved from being symbols of collective resistance to subjects of consumer scrutiny. Trust is no longer ideological; it is transactional, earned through usability, speed, and proof rather than shared values.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

News Consumption Patterns

Lebanese audiences have shifted from following news out of civic interest to consuming it as an act of survival. Continuous crises, from economic collapse to war, have transformed news monitoring into a defensive reflex, a way to manage fear and uncertainty rather than to stay informed in a democratic sense. WhatsApp, functioning as a lifeline, has become the default national newsroom where people seek updates less out of curiosity than to stay reassured and connected. The result is a form of information anxiety in which citizens feel compelled to stay connected at all times, even at the expense of their mental well-being. In this environment, information has lost its deliberative value; it is no longer a space for public reasoning but a mechanism of emotional self-preservation.

Media Habits and Information Ecosystem

Lebanon's media environment operates as a dual system: one formal and one informal. Traditional media such as television and radio still anchor the older generation, offering continuity and comfort, while younger audiences inhabit a digital ecosystem dominated by Instagram and TikTok. WhatsApp remained a constant across all generations, serving as a shared communication space. Each platform corresponds to a different mode of trust: television provides familiarity, WhatsApp fosters immediacy, and social media enables personalization. Yet these systems rarely intersect, leading to fragmented realities and parallel truths. The coexistence of these layers reflects a society caught between a longing for stable institutions and adaptation to a chaotic digital landscape. It is a media culture in transition, where credibility is negotiated daily between speed, proximity, and emotion.

Perceptions of Credibility and Trust

Trust in the media, always fragile in Lebanon, has further fragmented into a mosaic of individualized judgments shaped by politics, experience, and emotion. Political alignment remains the most common filter of belief, yet audiences increasingly acknowledge bias as universal and inevitable. As institutional credibility erodes, personal experience and visual evidence have become the new arbiters of truth. In this environment, "seeing" equates to "believing," even when audiences are aware of manipulation. The universal sentiment that "true independence doesn't exist" reflects not apathy

but a profound disenchantment with systems of information and power. Credibility has shifted from institutions to individual journalists and from editorial standards to lived validation. In effect, truth in Lebanon has become experiential rather than institutional.

Independent vs. Traditional Media

Independent media occupy an ambiguous position: desired in principle but largely invisible in practice. Most participants aspire to follow "neutral" outlets but cannot name any recognized independent platform. For many, independence simply means the absence of overt political alignment, rather than structural or financial autonomy. Outlets such as Megaphone and Daraj, while admired among educated elites, remain less known by wider audiences who perceive them as distant or elitist. Their visibility spikes during crises but fades in quieter times, revealing a dependency on instability for relevance. Traditional media, by contrast, retain familiarity but not trust. This duality highlights an ongoing identity crisis: Lebanese audiences crave alternatives to partisanship but still measure credibility through the same political and social hierarchies that sustain it.

Content Testing

The content testing revealed that audiences possess high awareness of major national issues but limited exposure to specific independent media pieces, indicating a saturated yet shallow information environment. People believe what they have personally witnessed — polluted rivers, economic collapse, corruption — but disengage from abstract political debates they perceive as repetitive and futile. Humanitarian stories, such as Naqd's Roumieh Prison documentary, cut across sectarian and class divides, eliciting empathy and moral engagement where political content provokes fatigue. However, this emotional resonance rarely translates into civic action, as audiences remain trapped in a cycle of awareness without agency. The persistence of "learned helplessness" suggests that while Lebanese citizens are informed and concerned, they no longer believe that information leads to change.

Website Homepage Testing

Reactions to the tested websites' homepages confirm that in the absence of institutional trust, design has become a new language of credibility. Participants judged professionalism not by reputation or ownership but by layout, organization, and color balance. Clean and visually coherent platforms like Beirut Today and Al-Akhbar's digital version were read as trustworthy, while cluttered, text-heavy, or overtly political designs (Daraj, Naqd) undermined credibility regardless of content quality. English-dominant interfaces alienated many users, while overt claims of "independence" or donation requests triggered suspicion rather than trust. The evaluation reveals that aesthetic clarity now functions as perceived indicator of integrity: Lebanese audiences infer reliability from calm design and accessibility more than from explicit declarations of independence. In a post-trust environment, presentation has become epistemic.

Cross-Cutting Conclusions

Across all themes, the findings converge on a portrait of a society that is hyper-informed yet disempowered. Lebanese audiences consume vast amounts of information but rarely act on it, constrained by distrust, fatigue, and a sense of futility. News functions less as a space for dialogue than as a survival tool in a context of chronic instability. Independent media face a dual challenge: they must gain visibility without being perceived as partisan and sustain relevance without relying on crisis. Ultimately, Lebanon's information landscape is defined not by a lack of knowledge but by a deficit of trust, efficacy, and inclusion. Rebuilding that foundation requires more than producing news, it demands restoring the social contract of information through empathy, accessibility, and credibility that feels human rather than institutional.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Audience Advice to Independent Media: Building Credibility and Expanding Reach

1. **Neutrality and Credibility as Core Expectations**
   Across all groups, neutrality emerged as the most common and non-negotiable expectation. Participants repeatedly called on independent outlets to "*stay honest and transparent*," "*avoid bias*," and "*not affiliate with any political party*." Yet neutrality here was understood not only as political distance, but also as behavioral integrity, reporting truthfully, avoiding provocation, and treating all communities with fairness.

2. **Simplicity, Summarization, and the Visual Turn**
   The majority of respondents, especially youth and lower-income participants, expressed fatigue with dense textual reporting. They preferred short, summarized formats supported by visuals and short videos. Visuals, particularly videos showing the source or event directly, were viewed as both more credible and more engaging.

3. **Diversification of Content and Tone**
   Participants voiced collective exhaustion with Lebanon's dominance of political and war coverage. Calls for variety and positivity, from health and education to art, culture, and everyday life, reflected a deep desire to see journalism that connects with lived experience rather than perpetuating crisis fatigue. Humor, lifestyle segments, and civic-minded topics were welcomed as ways to "change the mood" and sustain engagement.

4. **Relevance and Connection to Everyday Life**
   Content relevance was crucial for credibility. Health, cost of living, education, and safety were viewed as more credible topics than elite political debates. Credibility, in this sense, was defined by social proximity: media that speaks to people's lives rather than about them.

5. **Speed, Verification, and the Ethics of Immediacy**
   Several groups, especially in the Bekaa, South, and among socio-economically disadvantaged participants, demanded faster reporting, equating speed with presence and responsiveness. Yet others emphasized that speed should not compromise accuracy. The tension between being first and being right underscores Lebanon's evolving trust economy: audiences want immediacy but expect verification, ideally through visual or statistical proof.

6. **Human-Centered and Empathetic Storytelling**
   Participants favored emotional but non-provocative storytelling: "sympathetic, respectful, not harmful." Women specifically highlighted the role of tone, suggesting that empathy could enhance engagement without slipping into exaggeration. The best content was perceived as human-centered rather than ideologically charged.

7. **Funding Transparency and Local Ownership**
   Discussions around sustainability revealed widespread suspicion of foreign funding. Many respondents equated external support with hidden agendas, arguing that independence required local financing and public accountability. Transparency about funding was essential but risky, with some interpreting it as weakness rather than integrity.

8. **Visibility and Marketing as Credibility Builders**
   Finally, participants linked credibility to visibility: audiences trust what they encounter often. High-education professionals and youth alike advised independent media to invest in outreach to compete with legacy outlets.

Key Takeaway

Audiences across Lebanon envision credible independent media as neutral yet empathetic, fast yet verified, and diverse yet disciplined. They reward design quality, brevity, and visual storytelling over traditional long form reporting, and expect transparency not only in funding but in purpose. Independence, in their view, is not only political detachment, but also a communicative ethic: being accessible, relatable, and visibly accountable to the public rather than to power.

Ipsos' Recommendations for the Samir Kassir Foundation

1. **Reframe independence as public service, not opposition**
   The findings show that "independence" has become a contested and misunderstood concept, often seen as elitist or politically ambiguous.

   - **Shift messaging from "independent" to "public-interest" journalism**, emphasizing service to citizens rather than opposition to power.
   - Support media initiatives that demonstrate independence through their reporting, by **funding journalism that is fact-checked, inclusive, and rooted** in the experiences and needs of local communities.
   - **Launch awareness campaigns clarifying what editorial independence means** and why it matters for accountability and democracy.

2. **Bridge the visibility gap between quality and reach**
   Independent outlets remain largely invisible to ordinary Lebanese despite their strong reputations abroad.

   - **Invest in audience research and co-design**: support outlets in understanding and adapting to local consumption patterns, including dialect, tone, and platform choice.
   - **Fund outreach and distribution strategies** using WhatsApp, TikTok, and community-based dissemination to expand reach beyond urban elites.
   - **Facilitate collaboration between outlets and local influencers, and NGOs** to create trusted intermediaries who amplify verified information.

3. **Build a humanitarian and solutions-oriented journalism agenda**
   Audiences are disengaging from political content but respond powerfully to humanitarian and human-rights storytelling.

   - **Prioritize grants for journalism that connects policy issues to human consequences**, such as environment, education, poverty, and incarceration.
   - **Encourage "constructive journalism"** by funding stories that explore feasible solutions or highlight citizen-led initiatives rather than repeating crises.
   - **Train journalists in trauma-informed and human-centered reporting** to counter desensitization and foster empathy across divides.

4. **Make accessibility a core media ethics principle**
   Language, length, and format exclusion were among the strongest engagement barriers.

   - **Require bilingual or Arabic-first publication** for all grantees to ensure inclusivity.
   - **Support visual, audio, and short-form storytelling** that makes complex issues understandable to wider audiences.

- **Create shared resource pools**, such as infographics, translation, subtitling, that independent outlets can access to enhance accessibility and reduce production costs.

5. **Confront the crisis of trust through design and transparency**
   Design and presentation now function as proxies for credibility in Lebanon's fragmented media sphere.

   - **Offer capacity-building on visual credibility and ethical design** (layout, professional integrity, use of imagery, headlines).
   - **Encourage transparent storytelling about journalistic processes**, "how we verified this" boxes, visible bylines, and correction policies.
   - **Support the development of a "Transparency Label"** for Lebanese outlets meeting basic standards of sourcing, funding disclosure, and non-partisanship.

6. **Turn verification culture into civic literacy**
   The research shows audiences already attempt informal verification through social networks, comprising an opportunity to formalize and scale.

   - **Integrate media literacy into SKF's civic education programs**, targeting schools, universities, and municipalities.
   - **Support cross-platform "How to Verify" campaigns** in Arabic, using micro-content on WhatsApp and Instagram to teach accessible fact-checking skills.
   - **Partner with fact-checking initiatives** to create a unified "verification alliance" that standardizes approaches and expands trust networks.

7. **Counter learned helplessness by linking journalism to agency**
   Audiences feel informed but powerless.

   - **Encourage media content that provides pathways to action** (hotlines, petitions, volunteer opportunities, citizen reporting).
   - **Support follow-up journalism** tracking progress on issues already reported and turning information into accountability loops.
   - **Highlight stories of impact and change** to demonstrate that civic engagement can produce results, however small.

8. **Foster cross-regional narratives and co-production**
   Polarization limits cross-community engagement, but humanitarian stories cut through divisions.

   - **Launch joint reporting fellowships** pairing journalists from different regions or affiliations to co-produce stories of shared public interest.

- **Support local correspondents and citizen reporters** from underrepresented governorates to ensure geographic inclusivity.
- **Organize cross-regional editorial labs** where independent journalists collectively examine bias and build shared standards of fairness.

9. Address structural inequalities in access and infrastructure

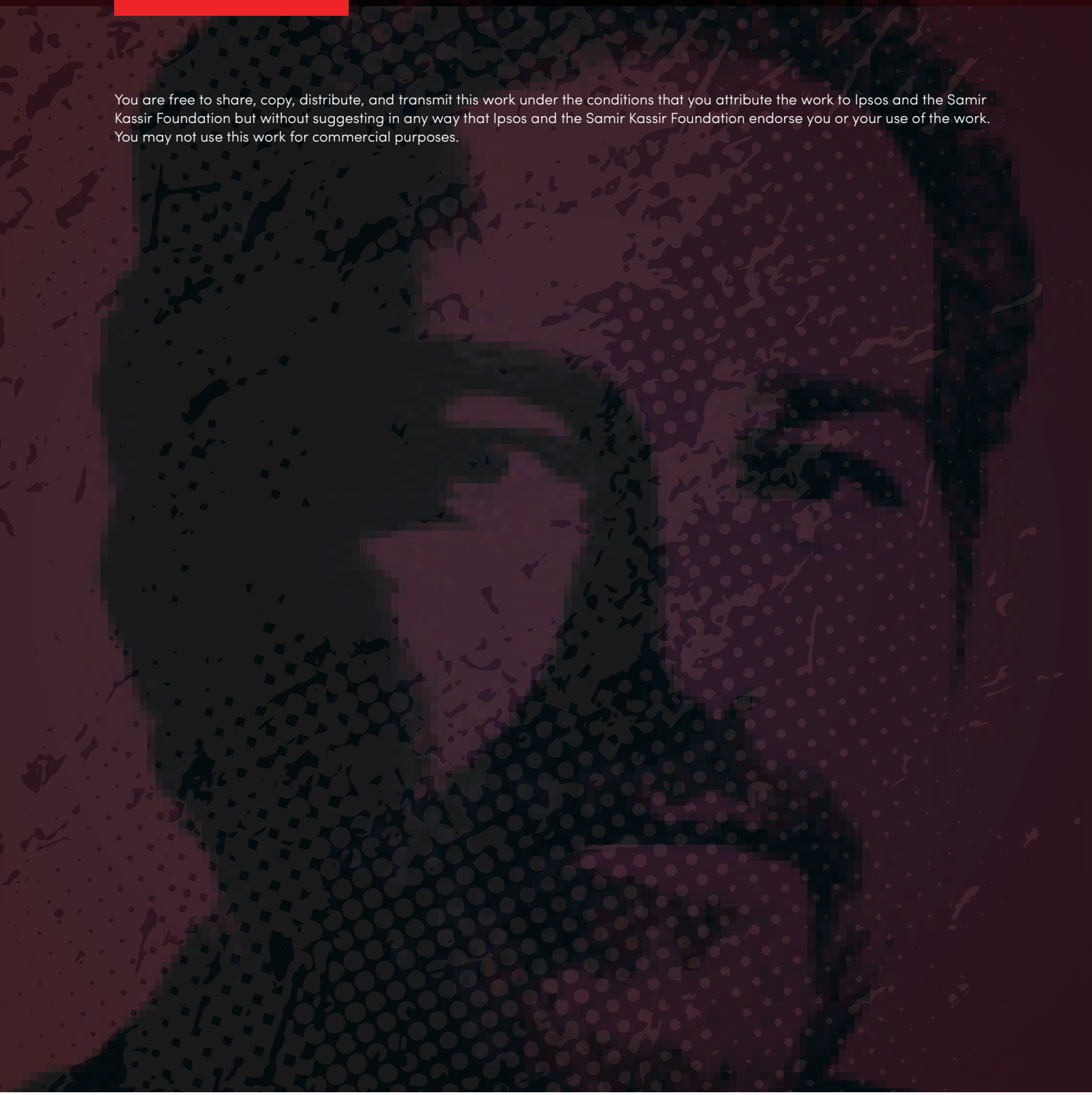
Media access in Lebanon remains shaped by class, geography, and electricity.

- **Fund low-data or offline dissemination formats** (WhatsApp, SMS, community radio, printable bulletins) for crisis reporting.
- **Advocate for digital infrastructure equity** by engaging telecom authorities and donors on affordable internet as a press freedom issue.
- **Equip local reporters** with digital and power backup tools (routers, batteries, data packages) to sustain news flow during outages.

10. Invest in ecosystem sustainability, not single outlets

Independent journalism cannot thrive on ad hoc project funding.

- **Support shared back-office and training services** (legal advice, data visualization, security, design) for multiple outlets.
- **Promote consortium funding models** where outlets jointly apply for thematic grants to encourage collaboration over competition.
- **Develop long-term capacity programs** on business models, audience monetization, and fundraising diversification to reduce donor dependency.



Design: Marc Rechdane
Program coordination: Wael Akiki
Researchers: Mirna Ghanem and Karim Safieddine
Editor: Ayman Mhanna

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Address: Riverside Bloc C
6th floor, Charles Helou Street
Sin el-Fil, Metn - Lebanon

Tel: +961 1 499012
info@skeyesmedia.org
skeyesmedia.org