

THE LEBANESE OIL AND GAS DEBATE ON SOCIAL MEDIA



A report by



THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

In cooperation with

MIDDLE EAST
Strategic Perspectives

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The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the Samir Kassir Foundation and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Benjamin Redd provided help with charts and data crunching.

Disclaimer:

This type of exercise must be considered with a degree of caution. On social media platforms, users can sponsor posts and buy followers and likes. On Facebook and Twitter, advertised posts are labelled as “Sponsored” or “Promoted” during the promotional campaign but not necessarily when they were grabbed for this exercise. Not all advertised posts are alike: promoters have the liberty to set the budget and duration that suit them, thus influencing post reach and feedback. It can be assumed that posts with an exceptionally high number of likes and shares compared to the engagement a certain account usually gets have been promoted.

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Introduction

Since 2013, the SKeys Center for Media and Cultural Freedom at the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) has partnered with Middle East Strategic Perspectives (MESP) to conduct a thorough monitoring of Lebanese media coverage of the oil and gas sector. SKeys and MESP are also cooperating with journalist Matt Nash and the Lebanese Oil and Gas Initiative (LOGI) to verify the accuracy of statements by politicians and prominent economists around the oil and gas sector.

In August 2014, SKeys and MESP published a first report entitled “Lebanese Media Coverage of the Oil and Gas Sector” available online at: http://www.skeyesmedia.org/extensions/pdf/Lebanese_Media_Coverage_of_the_Oil_and_Gas_Sector.pdf.

A second report was published in October 2016 and is available online at: http://www.skeyesmedia.org/extensions/pdf/Media_Coverage_of_Oil_and_Gas_Sector_2016.pdf.

A third report was published in May 2017 and is available online at:

http://www.skeyesmedia.org/extensions/pdf/Media_Monitoring_Oil_and_Gas_report_2017.pdf

Over the past three years, a series of workshops and trainings was provided to Lebanese journalists covering the sector, based on the findings of the SKeys-MESP reports.

The idea behind this special edition of our monitoring is to assess the level of engagement of the broader Lebanese public with the oil and gas debate on social media platforms, which have become one of, if not the leading source(s) of information for most.

This project is conducted thanks to the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Oil for Development program.

Methodology

In preparation for the monitoring, MESP identified the main Lebanese accounts addressing oil and gas on social media, their direct URL and number of followers. The list comprised organizational accounts only. Individual accounts were not included in this edition. The monitoring period extended for a year, from January 1 to December 31, 2016 and covered the two most popular social media platforms in Lebanon: Facebook and Twitter. The monitoring process targeted posts covering the nascent Lebanese oil and gas sector and developments related to the sector in neighboring countries. Posts that are general in nature were included, but posts addressing the sector in countries beyond the Eastern Mediterranean (East Med) were disregarded.

Retweets were disregarded. A Facebook post that was subsequently shared once or multiple times by the author of the post was counted once. The same article or link posted on several occasions on Twitter or Facebook were counted every single time.

The monitoring focused on:

- Language used;
- Topics covered;
- Accuracy of information; this was limited to the post or tweet published, not the article or the publication being shared;
- Number of likes;
- Number of shares or retweets;
- Number of replies (and how many of these were limited to tagging other accounts, a very popular feature which cannot be considered as part of the online discussion); and
- Type of post. Social media posts usually share: (i) a link to an article or a publication by a third party; (ii) a link to an article or a publication by the same organization; (iii) a

comment with a link to a post or publication; (iv) a comment without a link to a post or publication; (v) or a link to a post reproducing third party content on own website. Many also share a picture with a caption or a video.

MESP identified 10 topics thought to be the most relevant for social media coverage:

- Tender process;
- Legislative and institutional framework;
- Politics;
- Governance and transparency;
- Environment;
- Civil society;
- Economics, finance and markets;
- Infrastructure;
- Security and defense; and
- Export.

Subjects outside these 10 topics were also noted when covered. A significant number of these covered events around the sector, organized by various stakeholders, including oil and gas conferences, workshops, outdoor activities, etc.

Eight social media accounts were monitored and their posts subjected to an in-depth qualitative and quantitative monitoring:

- Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS)
- Lebanese Oil and Gas Initiative (LOGI)
- Lebanese Petroleum Society (LPS)
- Lebanon Gas and Oil
- Lebanon Gas News
- Middle East Strategic Perspectives (MESP)
- Oil and Gas Training (the only account that did not publish any post in 2016)
- Organization for Petroleum and Energy Sustainability (OPES)

Results

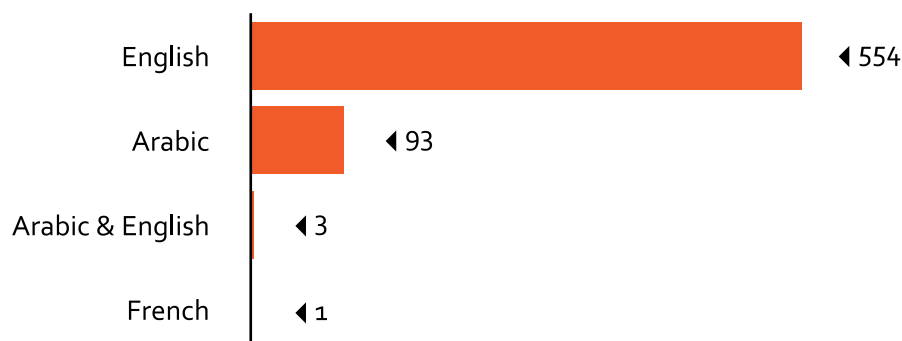
General Numbers

A total of 651 posts were collected, including 349 Facebook posts and 302 tweets. The accounts monitored had a clear preference for communicating in English (554 posts), followed by Arabic (93 posts).

Figure 1. Number of posts by platform

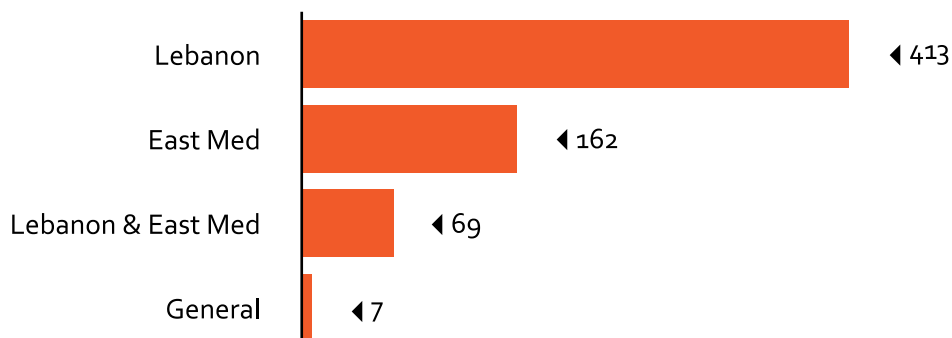


Figure 2. Number of posts by language



Of these 651 posts, 413 were about Lebanon, 162 about the sector in one or more Eastern Mediterranean country/countries, 69 posts covered subjects that concern Lebanon and other countries in East Med (for example regional cooperation or border disputes) and seven posts were general in nature.

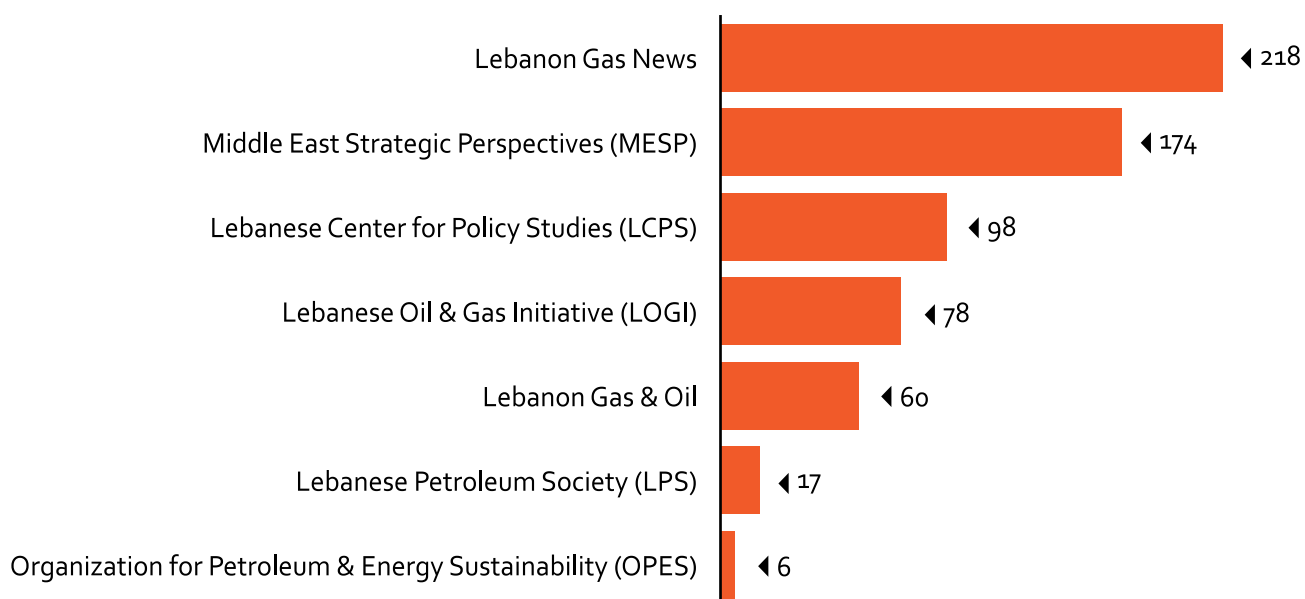
Figure 3. Number of posts by regional focus



The number of errors identified was marginal, considering the vast majority of posts consisted simply of a URL and the title of the article or online publication shared, or a picture from an event and its accompanying caption.

Few posts ventured out of the comfort zone of simply sharing already published material or media files (pictures or videos).

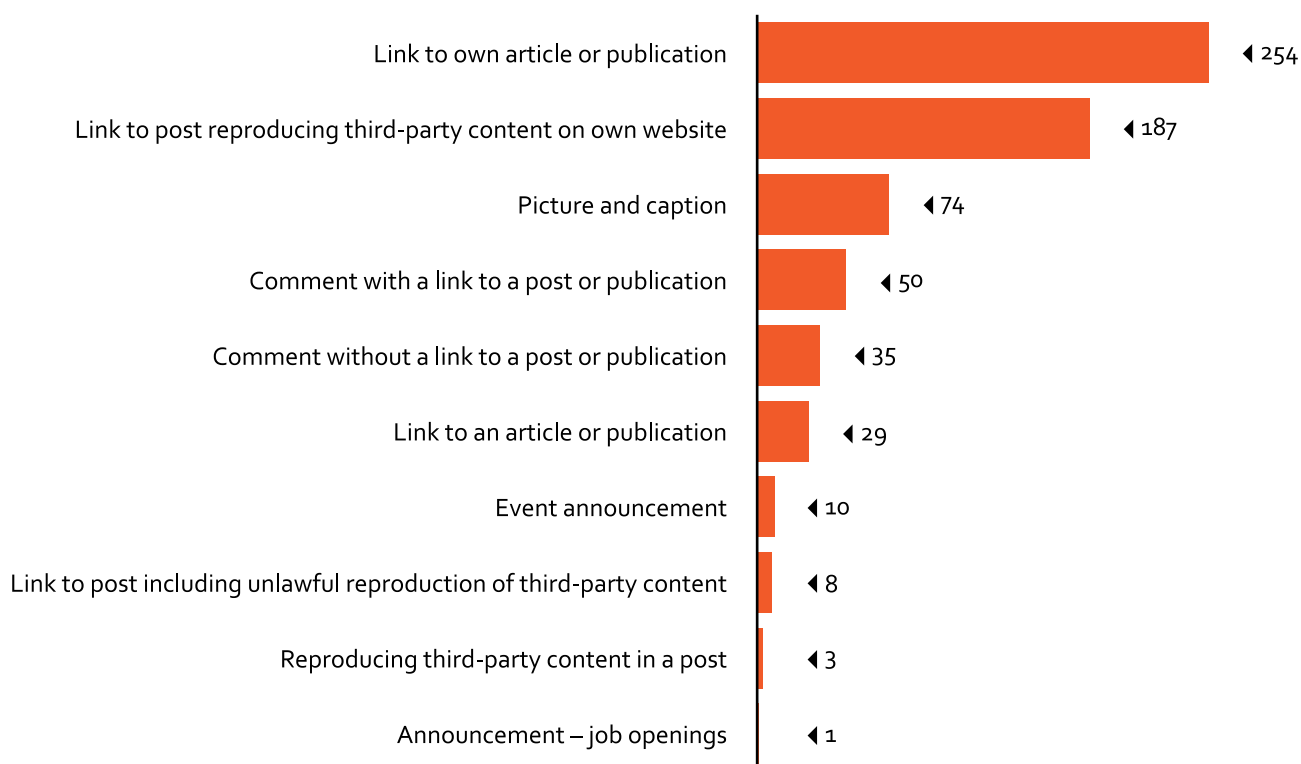
Figure 4. Number of posts by social media account



Type of Posts

The first thing one notices is that the online oil and gas debate is limited to a certain type of posts that is not particularly conducive to exchange. A majority of posts linked to an online article or publication (470 posts), or published a picture with a caption (74 posts) or announced an event (10 posts). That amounts to 554 posts with no input from the poster, out of a total of 651.

Figure 5. Number of posts by type



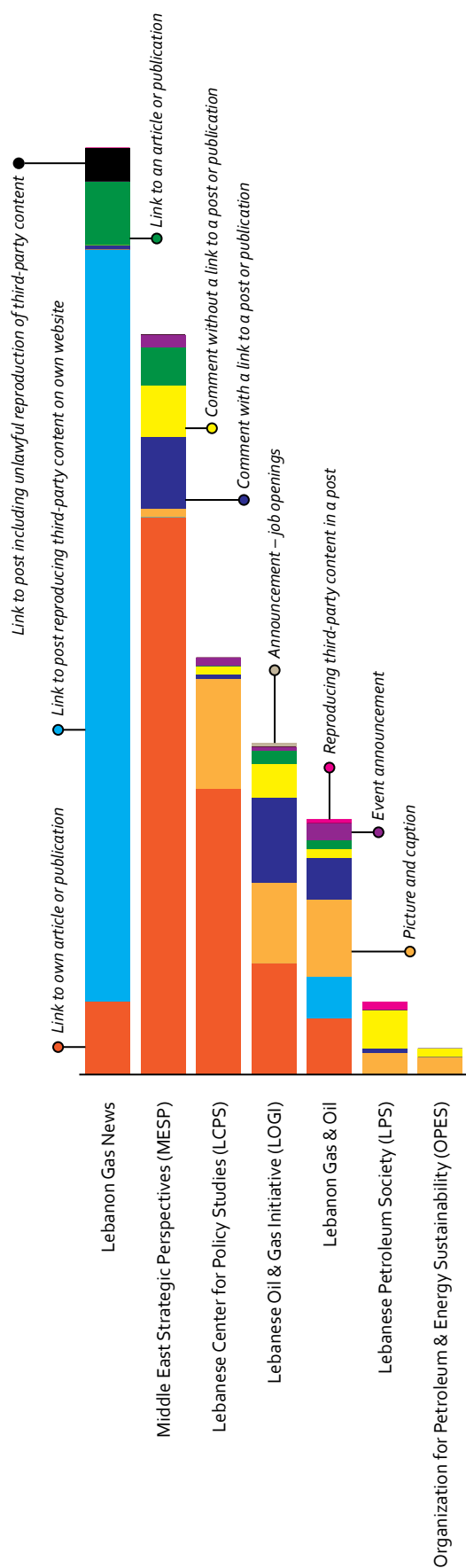
Having around 85% of posts void of any meaningful contribution from the poster suggests that organizations did not embrace social media as a main vector to promote positions and knowledge about the oil and gas beside linking to already published articles or posting pictures.

Nevertheless, if we look closely, the picture is not that bleak. Of these 554 posts, 254 link to articles or publications by the same organizations that posted

the information on social media. This type of posts was the most frequently used. It also means that **in-house production is very much present but the debate happens outside social media.**

These 254 posts are divided as follows: 131 by MESP; 67 by LCPS; 26 by LOGI; 17 by Lebanon Gas News and 13 by Lebanon Gas & Oil. The numbers refer to the frequency of relaying in-house production on social media.

Figure 6. Number of posts by social media account and type



The rest of the posts linking to already published articles or publications, consist of:

- Oil and gas publications produced by other authors** (29 posts): 15 of these were posted by Lebanon Gas News; nine by MESP; three by LOGI; and two by Lebanon Gas & Oil.
- Posts reproducing third-party content on own website** (187 posts). This is theoretically the second most preferred type of coverage, but almost 95 percent of all the posts in this category were posted by one account, Lebanon Gas News (177 posts). Out of these 177 posts, 28 linked to what can be considered an improper reproduction of third-party content, as the original source was neither indicated nor linked to. The remaining 10 posts in this category were posted by Lebanon Gas & Oil.

Posting a **picture with a caption** is the third most preferred coverage type with 74 posts. These are usually pictures from events, either organized or attended by the manager of the account that is posting the picture. Twenty-six were posted by LCPS, 19 by LOGI, 18 by Lebanon Gas & Oil, five by the Lebanese Petroleum Society, four by OPES, and two by MESP.

Fifty posts **added a comment when linking to an article or a publication**, making it the fourth most popular type of coverage. This goes a step further than simply sharing the title and URL of an article or publication, although a lot of the comments are excerpts from or an introduction to the shared article or publication. Twenty were posted by LOGI, 17 by MESP, and 10 by Lebanon Gas & Oil.

Thirty-five posts went even further by **commenting on the oil and gas sector, without relying on or linking to any other supporting document**, whether an online article or publication or a picture. Here we find analysis, statements, sharing general knowledge and, in some cases, announcements. Twelve posts were published by MESP, nine by the Lebanese Petroleum Society, eight by LOGI. LCPS, Lebanon Gas & Oil and OPES each posted two.

On the other side of the spectrum, eight posts linked to **content that falsely claimed authorship of articles and reports** originally published by Chatham House, Globes, Natural Gas World, among others. These were found on the Lebanon Gas News website.

Coverage

Figure 7. Number of posts by topic

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



No major progress in the oil and gas sector in Lebanon was made in 2016. The first licensing round, which was launched in May 2013, was put on hold due to an incomplete legal and regulatory framework. There were several attempts by the political class to adopt the needed legislation and revive the sector, all unsuccessful until the election of a new President in October 2016, followed by the formation of a national unity government, signaling an end to the political deadlock in the country. This context explains why **“Politics”** (139 posts) was at the top of the list of topics that the accounts we monitored discussed during that year. Accounts that tackled this topic the most

were MESP (65 posts), Lebanon Gas News (50) and LOGI (10).

The second most frequently discussed topic in 2016 was **“Governance and Transparency”** (106 posts). A series of developments, including the protracted power vacuum within the executive branch, the trash crisis, inconclusive tenders, etc. brought to light the country’s governance challenges and raised serious concerns over the government’s ability to manage the nascent oil and gas sector. Out of the 106 posts, 50 were posted by LCPS, 27 by LOGI and 17 by MESP.

While 2016 was a slow-news year, with little progress in the sector, it was not a dull year. The numerous oil and gas events held throughout the year somehow managed to maintain interest in the sector. They also boosted the online oil and gas discussion. Coverage of these **“Events”** was the third most popular topic, with 90 posts, either promoting an event, or reporting from an event, or simply posting pictures and other media files with captions. In fact, of all the posts identified, around 73 were limited to posting pictures from events and an accompanying caption. **While this type of coverage contributes to keeping the subject alive on social media, it is also symptomatic of the limited online debate around the sector, which rarely ventured out of the comfort zone of sharing articles and pictures.** Out of these 90 posts, LCPS and Lebanon Gas & Oil posted 31 each, followed by LOGI with 10 posts.

The **“Tender Process”** was understandably relegated to the fourth place (49 posts), given the lack of progress in Lebanon’s tendering process. Most of these posts covered the tender process in neighboring countries. Only 19 posts were about Lebanon’s first licensing round, and an additional four touched on Lebanon’s auction while giving a broader, regional perspective. Thirty posts in this category were posted by Lebanon Gas News,

though 24 of these linked to posts reproducing third-party content on Lebanon Gas News' own website; followed by MESP with nine posts and Lebanon Gas & Oil with six.

The **“Legal and Institutional Framework”** was the fifth most discussed topic with 47 posts, all but a handful about Lebanon. Most of these posts revolved around a question that gained steam in 2016: Should Lebanon establish a national oil company? The main driver encouraging this online discussion was the publication by MESP and LCPS of an article and a paper (respectively) addressing the issue of establishing a national oil company in Lebanon. Out of these 47 posts, 19 were posted by LCPS and 17 by MESP.

“Civil Society” came in next with 41 posts. Twenty-four of these were posted by LOGI, 11 by MESP. The posts in this category were all about Lebanon, except two which were general in nature.

Posts categorized as **“General”** followed, with 34 posts. Most of these were posted by Lebanon Gas News (18) and MESP (14).

There were 34 posts addressing **“Exploration and Drilling”**. Virtually all were posted by MESP and Lebanon Gas News. All Lebanon Gas News posts were about East Med and all of them linked to posts reproducing third-party content on their own website. All but one of MESP's posts in this category were about Lebanon and East Med at the same time. A similar trend was observed for posts addressing **“Regional Cooperation”**, which gathered a total of 29 posts.

There were 30 posts addressing **“Economics, Finance and Markets”**. LCPS was the main contributor in this category, with 21 posts, owing to the economic nature of a number of their papers published that year.

Posts addressing **“Border Dispute”** issues came next with a total of 26 posts. All of these posts involved Lebanon. Twenty-two posts in this category were posted by MESP.

“Export and Import” of resources was addressed in 24 posts. Eighteen of these were posted by Lebanon Gas News. A similar trend was observed for the **“Gas/Oil Field Development”** category. All 22 posts in this category discussed gas or oil fields discovered in Cyprus, Egypt and Israel.

“App”, with 21 posts, is an unusual theme in the industry that found its way to the list of most discussed oil and gas topics online. The launching by the Samir Kassir Foundation of **LOG&Learn***, an app dedicated to providing accurate information about Lebanon's nascent oil and gas sector, propelled it as a category into the list of most discussed topics online. Most of these posts were published by MESP (14) and LOGI (5).

There was a total of 19 posts under the **“Infrastructure”** category. Eleven of these were posted by Lebanon Gas News (all them on East Med), and eight by MESP (mostly on East Med but including some posts about Lebanon).

Seventeen posts had an artistic touch. All of the posts under the **“Art”** category were posted by LOGI, which organized an art competition in 2016, inviting candidates to express how they think oil and gas discoveries could impact them.

“Interest Group” gathered 16 posts. All the posts under this category were posted by MESP and were related to the creation of the Beirut Energy Club, an informal club gathering professionals working in the oil and gas industry in Lebanon and the region.

* LOG&Learn is available for [iOS](#) and [Android](#).

The oil and gas discussion online is fairly vast and has tackled numerous other subjects such as “Media”, “Publications”, “Environment”, “Reserves Estimates”, “Surveys”, “Licensing”, “Job Opportunities”, “Discovery”, though none of these categories gathered more than 10 posts.

Note that since posts can cover more than one topic, the numbers in Figure 7 exceed the total number of posts grabbed during our monitoring.

Post Interaction

Few posts triggered a conversation in 2016. Out of the 651 posts grabbed during the monitoring, 584 (84.2 percent) did not get any reply. Fifty-five posts (8.4 percent) got between one and five replies. Most of these were not promoted, though some were. Seven posts received between six and 10 replies, all of them appear to have been promoted. Five posts got over 10 replies, also appearing to have been promoted. Of these, one got 12 replies, another 14 replies, and three gathered 40, 68 and 107 replies. Limiting the conversation even further, the majority of these replies (176 out of a total of 291, i.e. 60.5 percent) were limited to tagging other accounts (a method used by users to

notify other individuals about a post they believe might interest them).

The number of likes also varies depending on whether a post was promoted or not. Of the 472 posts that did get likes (72.5 percent of the total number of posts), 391 (82.8 percent) got between one and 10 likes. None of these posts were promoted. Thirty-six (7.6 percent) got between 11 and 20 likes. None of these posts were promoted. Seventeen (3.6 percent) got between 21 and 50 likes. These include seven posts that we suspect might have been promoted. Twenty-eight posts (5.9 percent) got over 50 likes. Many of these got hundreds of likes. Five of them even got thousands of likes. All these posts are assumed to have been promoted.

As for retweets and shares, 267 posts (41 percent of all monitored posts) did not get any. 357 posts (54.8 percent) got between 1 and 5 retweets or shares. Only 17 of these are assumed to have been promoted. Eight posts got between 6 and 10 retweets or shares. None are thought to have been promoted. Twelve got between 11 and 20 retweets or shares. Nine of these are assumed to have been promoted. Seven posts got over 20 retweets or shares. All of them are thought to have been promoted.

Main trends

- The oil and gas activity on social media relies on sharing in-house production. Content produced by the authors of an account were instrumental in initiating online activity. Around 39 percent of posts linked to an article or a publication by the same organization running the social media account.
- Another 29 percent linked to posts reproducing third-party content on the website of the organization running the social media account. Most of these were by a single account.
- Monitored accounts rarely added their own input when posting: 85 percent of posts did not have any input from the poster and were limited to linking to an online article or publication (470 posts), or to posting a picture with a caption (74 posts), or announcing an event (10 posts).
- Very few posts ventured out of the comfort zone of simply sharing an article or posting a picture or an announcement. Less than 35 posts (5.4 percent), out of 651, commented on developments in the oil and gas sector or engaged in analysis.
- The online debate was limited, brief and did not solicit significant exchange. Out of a total of 651 posts, only 67 (10.3 percent) received replies, often owing to accounts promoting their posts. Limiting the conversation even further, a lot of these replies were limited to tagging other accounts.
- The accounts monitored all had a clear preference for communicating in English: 85 percent of posts were in English.
- There was a slight preference for Facebook. Over 53 percent of the posts were published on what is also Lebanon's preferred social media platform.
- Most posts fell under the "Politics" or "Governance and Transparency" categories. This is not surprising given the prevailing political deadlock during most of 2016, which paralyzed the sector. It also reflects genuine concerns among the population on how the sector is going to be managed.
- Oil and gas events organized throughout the year contributed to boosting the online activity. Almost 14 percent of posts reported on these various events.
- Very few factual mistakes were identified in the tweets and Facebook posts published during the monitoring period. Note, however, that information verified was limited to the post or tweet published, not the article or the publication being shared.

Recommendations

- Encourage government officials and institutions to take part in the debate. Neither the Lebanese Petroleum Administration nor the Ministry of Energy and Water have active accounts on Twitter and Facebook. A social media presence will encourage the online debate and contribute to increasing transparency by engaging with the public.
- Encourage the online debate by initiating discussions. The discussion should not be confined to a forum or online group of interested individuals because this could restrict the debate. It should take advantage of the open space provided by social media platforms to encourage the widest possible participation. One idea could be to hold Q&A sessions on Twitter or Facebook with experts or officials working on the oil and gas sector.
- Based on a list of the main accounts addressing Lebanese oil and gas on social media, develop an online aggregator collecting the latest oil and gas posts. It would have the added-value of featuring a substantive part of the social media debate in one place and identifying top-influencers.
- Create synergies between the debate on social media and the debate via traditional media outlets. This can be done by encouraging media outlets to have a more dynamic oil and gas activity on social media platforms.
- Encourage the use of Arabic to reach the widest possible audience.
- Revise how the reproduction of third-party content is done. A lawful reproduction does not claim authorship. In addition, a proper reproduction should state the original author clearly and link to the original content.

Annex

Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS)

Think Tank



Figure 8. Number of posts by language – LCPS

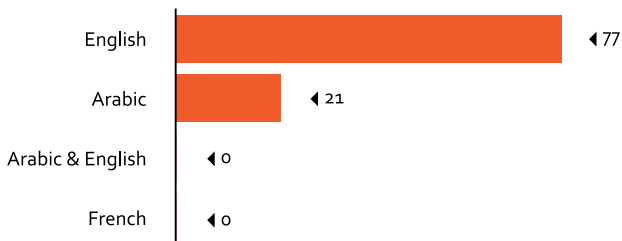


Figure 9. Number of posts by platform – LCPS

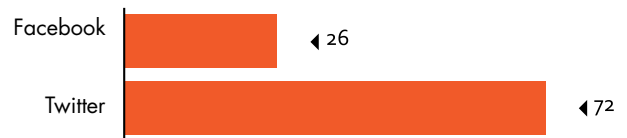


Figure 10. Number of posts by type – LCPS

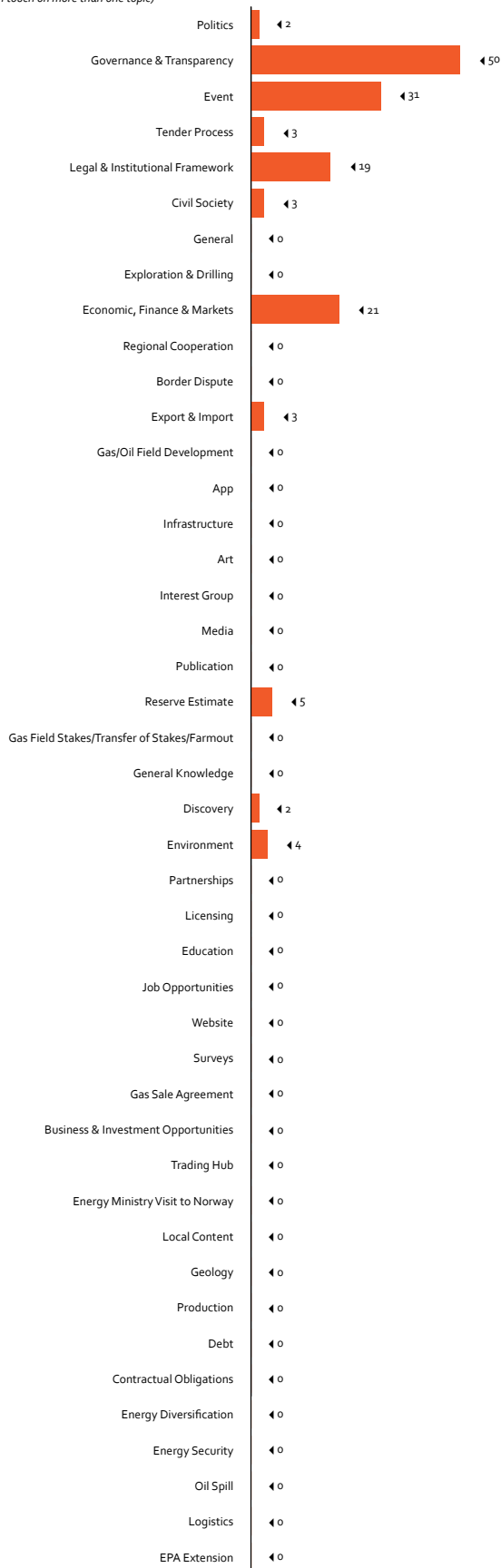


Figure 11. Number of posts by region – LCPS



Figure 12. Number of posts by topic – LCPS

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



Lebanese Oil & Gas Initiative (LOGI)

Non-Governmental Organization



Figure 13. Number of posts by language – LOGI

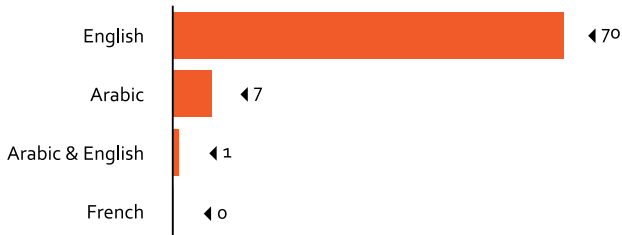


Figure 14. Number of posts by platform – LOGI



Figure 15. Number of posts by type – LOGI

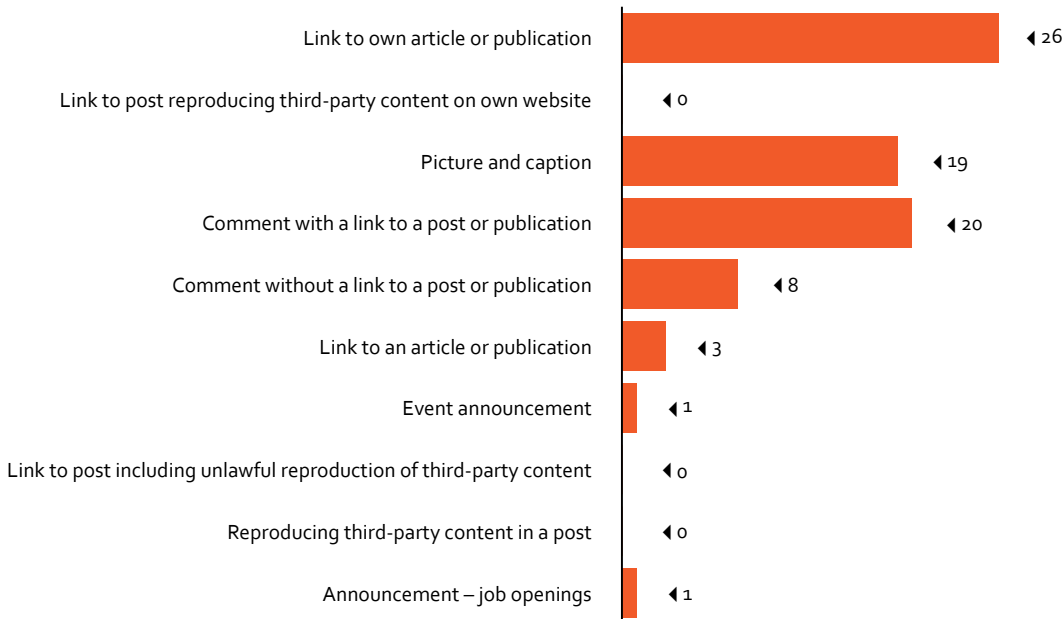
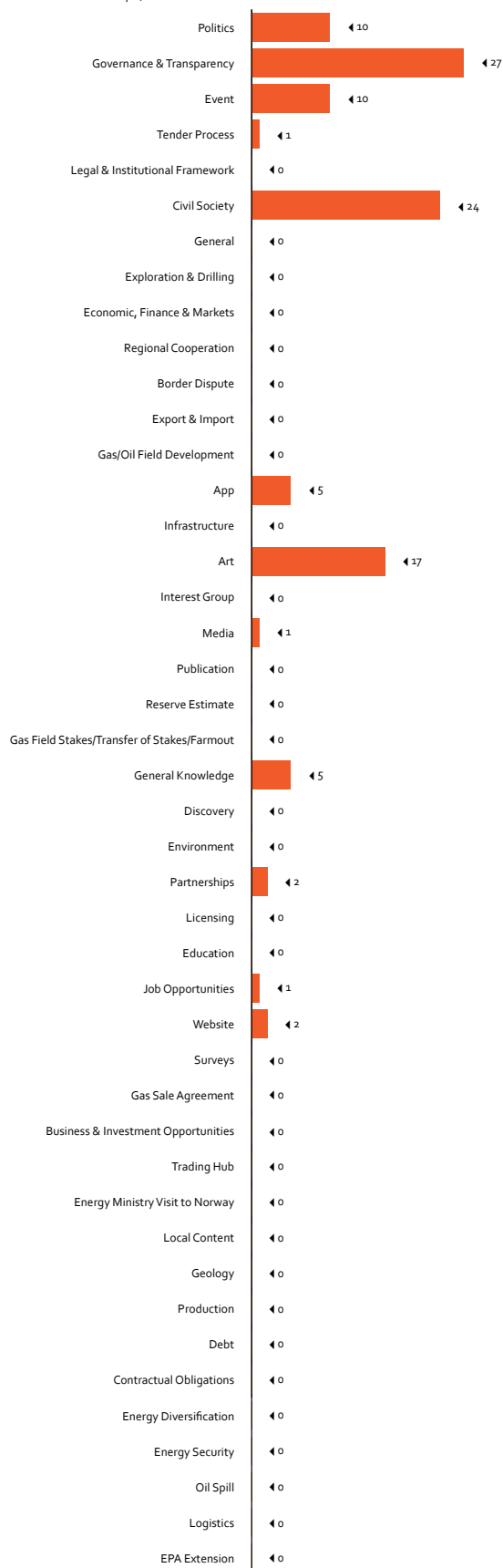


Figure 16. Number of posts by region – LOGI



Figure 17. Number of posts by topic – LOGI

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



Lebanese Petroleum Society (LPS)

Student Association

Figure 18. Number of posts by language – LPS



Figure 19. Number of posts by platform – LPS



Figure 20. Number of posts by type – LPS

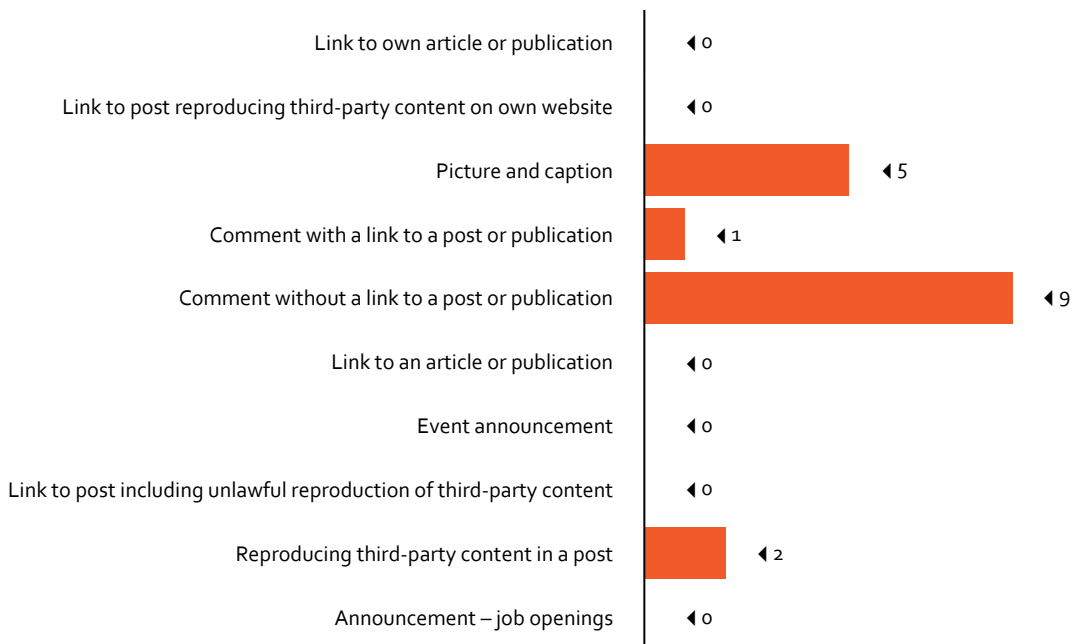


Figure 21. Number of posts by region – LPS

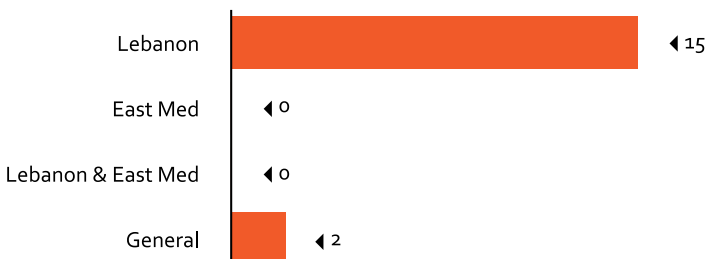
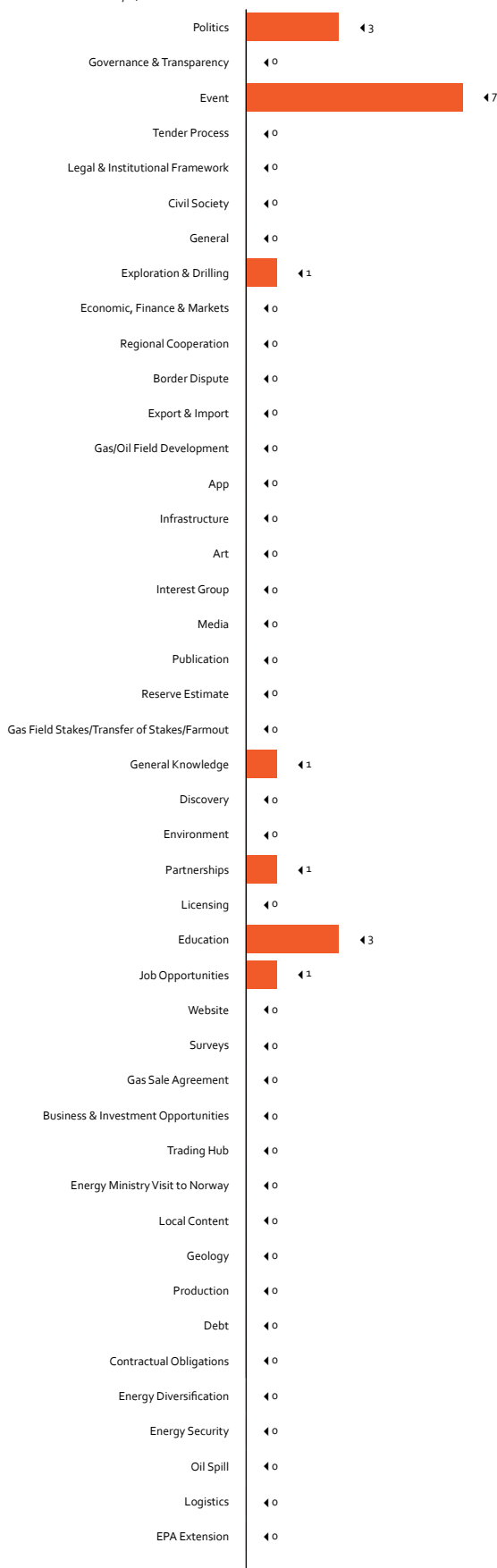


Figure 22. Number of posts by topic – LPS

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



Lebanon Gas & Oil

Website  

Figure 23. Number of posts by language – LG&O



Figure 24. Number of posts by platform – LG&O



Figure 25. Number of posts by type – LG&O

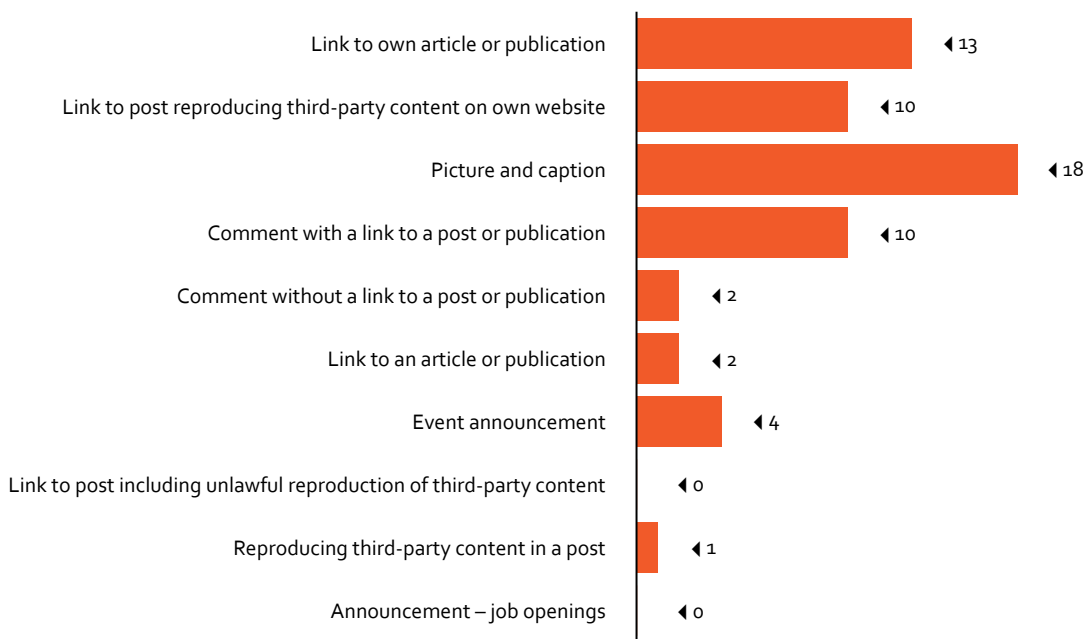


Figure 26. Number of posts by region – LG&O

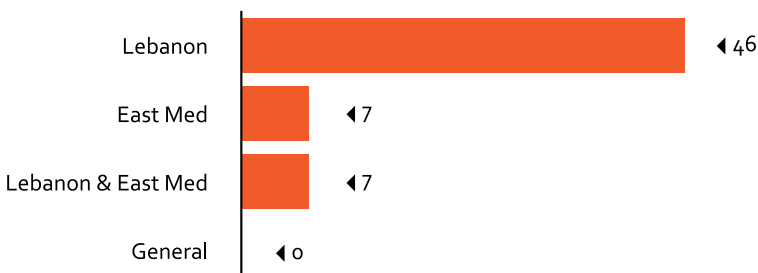


Figure 27. Number of posts by topic – LG&O

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



Lebanon Gas News

Website  

Figure 28. Number of posts by language – LGN

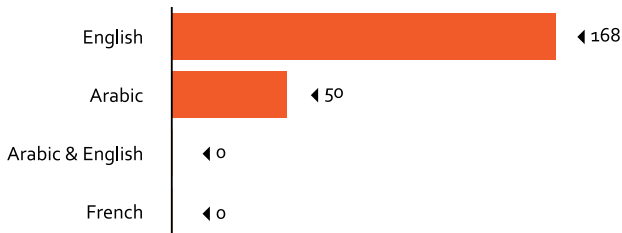


Figure 29. Number of posts by platform – LGN



Figure 30. Number of posts by type – LGN

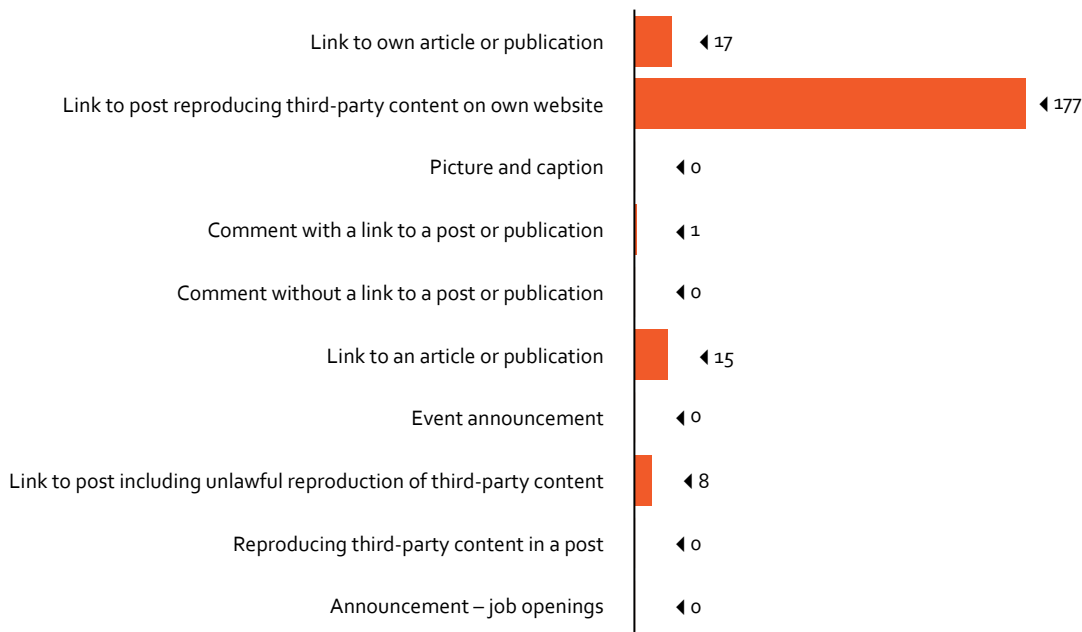


Figure 31. Number of posts by region – LGN

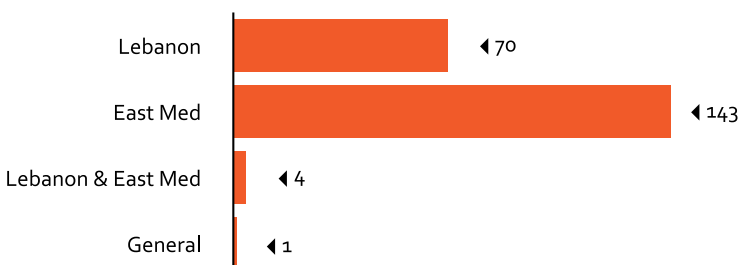


Figure 32. Number of posts by topic – LGN

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



Middle East Strategic Perspectives (MESP)

For-Profit Consultancy



Figure 33. Number of posts by language – MESP



Figure 34. Number of posts by platform – MESP



Figure 35. Number of posts by type – MESP

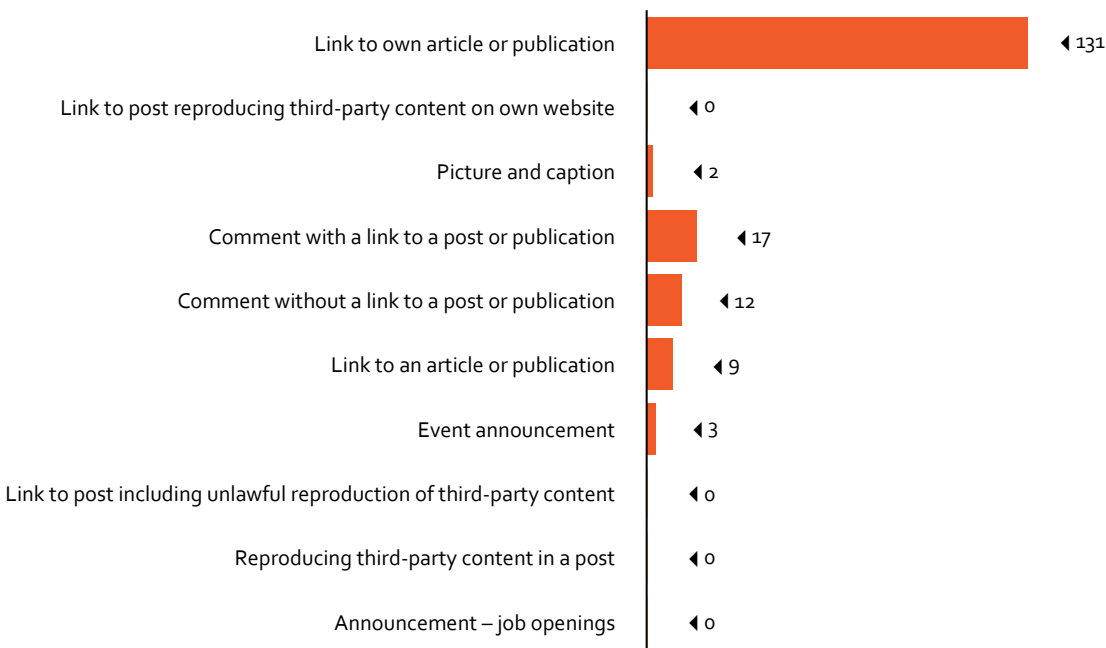


Figure 36. Number of posts by region – MESP

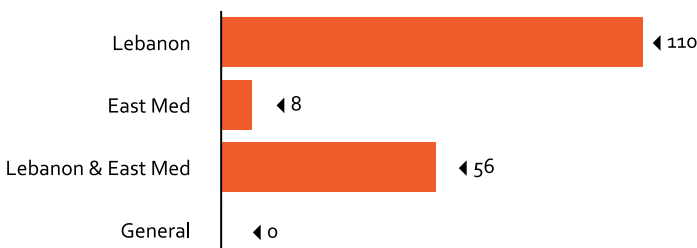
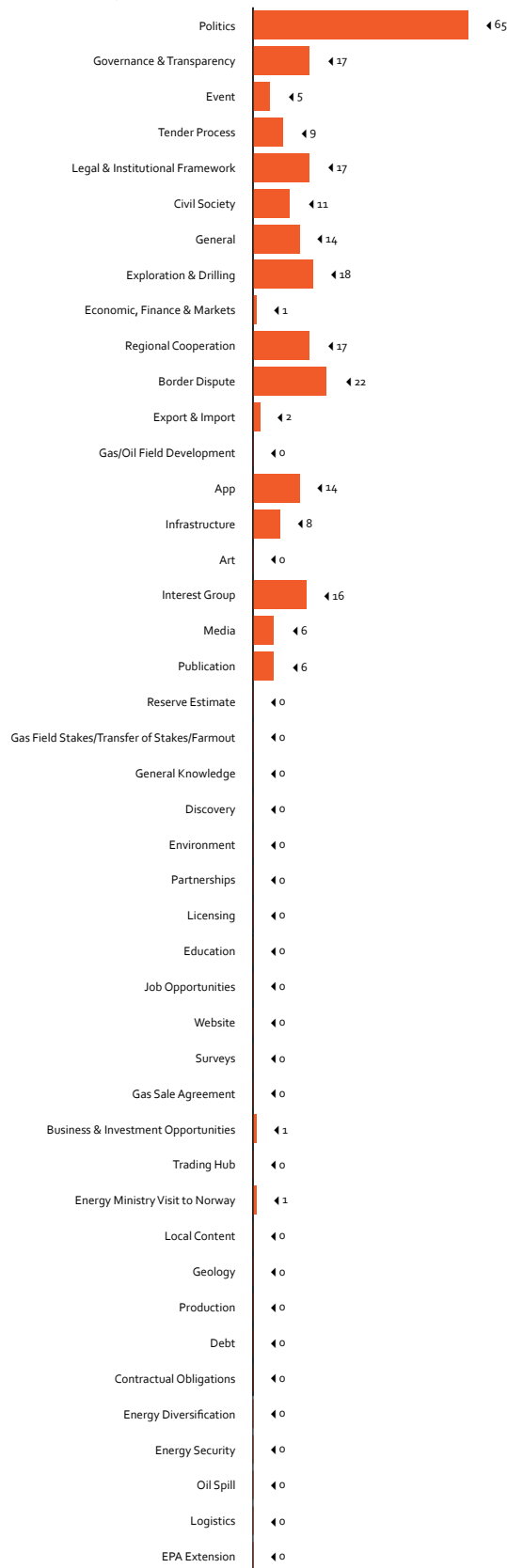


Figure 37. Number of posts by topic – MESP

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



Organization for Petroleum & Energy Sustainability (OPES)

Non-Governmental Organization



Figure 38. Number of posts by language – OPES



Figure 39. Number of posts by platform – OPES



Figure 40. Number of posts by type – OPES

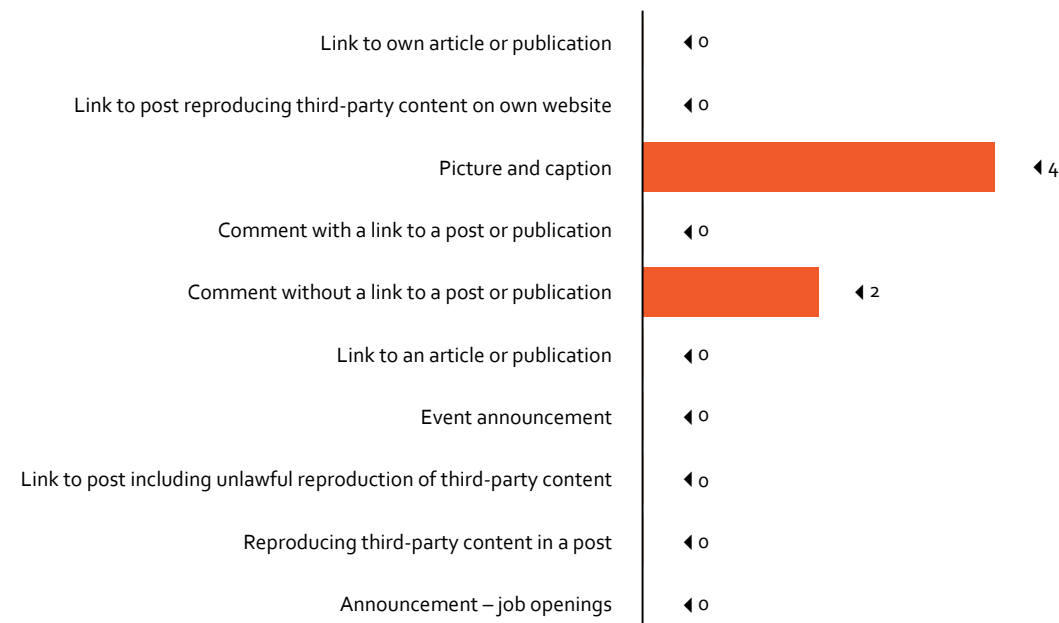


Figure 41. Number of posts by region – OPES

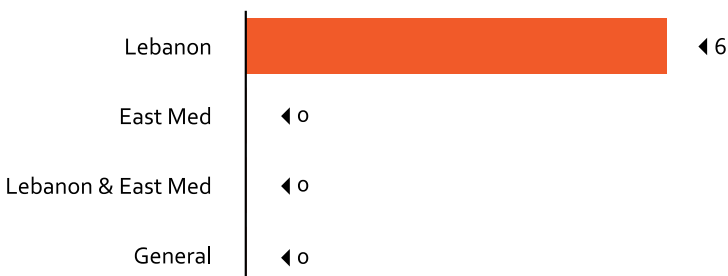


Figure 42. Number of posts by topic – OPES

(Posts can touch on more than one topic)



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