

## **Sowing the seeds of digital and media literacy in Lebanon and the Arab World: The importance of a locally grown and sustainable curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

In a country notorious for its recurrent civil strife, religious sectarianism, political and social divisions, and weak sense of citizenry and identity, what can digital and media literacy offer to help mend and bring together highly diverse—and often divisive—cultural expressions? Studies have long shown how Lebanese media—old and new—continue to reproduce social and political divisions and the entrenched confessional political system that has plagued the country for almost a century. More recent studies have also highlighted the poor state of media education in the region and the low level of media literacy among its youth, a segment with the best potential to effect change, if given the chance to engage in the growing participatory culture as empowered citizens, not mere media consumers and reproducers of the status quo. This chapter reviews the advance of digital and media literacy in Lebanon and its potential for enhancing media education and fostering a participatory culture in the region. It highlights the success of a local digital and media literacy brand in instilling critical thinking skills among university students and empowering them to become active producers and full participants in contemporary culture. It tracks the continued attempts to develop and spread media literacy at Lebanese universities, schools, and civil society groups, in the hopes of promoting social change through education and empowerment.

### **Sowing the seeds of digital and media literacy in Lebanon and the Arab World: The importance of a locally grown and sustainable curriculum**

Media literacy education has much to offer Lebanon and the Arab region, yet it remains in its infancy struggling to affirm its importance in academe. Decades of conflict, rampant corruption, authoritarian rule, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression and the press have turned much of Arab media education into factories that produce and sustain a “sensorial culture” and “prepare generation after generation of semi-educated journalists whose job is to promote the ‘achievements’ of the state” (Amin, 2002, p. 129). Nevertheless, the past decade has witnessed a revival in media education (Melki, 2011), thanks in part to a revolution in communication technologies and a wave of political and cultural uprising that swept the region and brought digital and media literacy to the forefront, especially in countries like Lebanon.

Lebanon has been a leader in promoting media literacy education both at the university and civil society levels, thanks to its relatively free media climate and high degree of academic freedom, in addition to the existence of many media programs and a diverse spectrum of curricula (Melki, 2009). It also has a talented media workforce and a vibrant civil society, with some 3,500 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) spearheading a plethora of causes, some of which are related to media literacy (UNDP, 2009). Therefore, Lebanon offers a significant potential for developing a strong local media literacy brand and for advancing it throughout the region.

Simultaneously, Lebanese society stands to gain much from media literacy. At a societal level, Lebanon is made up of highly diverse, often clashing, religious and political cultures and identities. This distinguishing cultural characteristic is partly responsible for its curious freedom but also one of the main culprits behind Lebanon's confessional sectarian political system, its persistent discriminatory laws and practices (Hanafi and Tiltes, 2008; Farhood, 2009), the lack of social and cultural cohesion, rampant political and economic corruption (Khashan, 2011), and its constant state of political turmoil and instability (Shehadeh, 1998; Dawahare, 2000; Makdisi, Kiwan and Marktanner, 2010).

Research extending back decades has shown how Lebanese media—traditional and new—reproduce social and political divisions and the entrenched confessional political system that has plagued the country for almost a century (Dajani, 1992; Nötzold, 2009; Melki, Dabbous, Nasser and Mallat, 2012). Part of the problem is that almost all media institutions are tied to political groups (Al-Najjar, 2011; Melki et al., 2012), and Lebanese audiences tend to follow media that reflect their own ideologies and affiliations. Lebanon's news media echo the sectarian makeup of the country's population and closely reflect the agendas of their political sponsors (Dajani, 2006). Moreover, poor critical media literacy skills among Lebanese youth help perpetuate this problem (Melki, 2010).

But problems directly or indirectly related to low media literacy levels extend beyond the political sphere and may be linked to Lebanon's widespread consumerism and a growing materialist culture obsessed with physical appearance, titles and status, and additionally complicated with a conflicted identity that thrives for modernity—particularly in its Western form—yet clings onto contradictory traditional values. Add to that, widespread discrimination against women, who remain severely underrepresented in positions of power, especially in government and media industries and face an oppressive regime of discriminatory laws (Byerly, 2011), matched only by rampant sexually objectifying media stereotypes and a paradoxical culture of sexuality that conflates postmodern sexual body display with traditional expectations of sexuality (Mallat, 2011, p. 81). Moreover, Lebanese Women—and increasingly men—face a “cosmetic surgery and beauty regime” and social pressures that normalize bodily modification and alteration (Doherty, 2008). The increase in demand for plastic surgery seems to never cease and the supply of steroids for overly muscular male figures is becoming increasingly obvious, especially in Beirut.

These and other issues make Lebanese society a fertile ground in need of the media literacy seed but also readily able, through its strong educational system, to spread its ideas and concepts throughout the Arab region.

### **State of digital and media literacy education in Lebanon**

Media literacy in Lebanon has made some advances in the past five years, both on the academic and civil society fronts. One can attribute this progress to the efforts of several academics and civil society leaders, but an important contributing factor has also been the Arab uprisings and the role social media has played in these revolts.

The first full-fledged media literacy course to be offered at a Lebanese university was launched in Fall 2009, prompted by a curriculum developed at the *Salzburg Academy for Media and Global Change*—a global collective that has been producing media literacy curricula since 2007. The course quickly attracted many students at the American University of Beirut (AUB), partly due to combining critical media literacy proficiencies with hands-on digital literacy skills. Later, it became designated a writing intensive course and began to

incorporate more locally relevant modules and examples, such as religious sectarianism and political patronage of media institutions. Many students who attended the course also participated in the *Salzburg Academy* and helped add more local examples and case studies. As an extension to this course, and in an effort to promote media literacy education in Lebanon and the region, AUB hosted in 2011 an international conference titled *Digital and Media Literacy: New Directions*, with the support of the Open Society Foundations (OSF). The coincidental climaxing of the Arab uprising around the time of the conference strongly contributed to its success in promoting the need for media literacy in the region. Many attendees showed interest in teaching media literacy at their home institutions but complained of the challenges they faced, especially the scarcity of curricular material in Arabic and the lack of skills to teach the course. Subsequently, the conference outcomes report recommended the establishment of an annual academy that trains Arab media professors on teaching digital and media literacy and produces curricular material in Arabic. Supported again by OSF, the academy will debut in summer 2013. Moreover, at the request of a handful of Lebanese universities and schools, AUB faculty members have presented their media literacy curriculum in guest lectures around the country. Two universities adopted parts of the curriculum in their existing communication courses, and several confirmed interest in developing full media literacy courses after attending the summer academy. Several schools have also shown interest in incorporating media literacy in their teaching, but few concrete steps have been taken to implement this.

Other universities have also attempted to introduce courses related to media literacy. Lebanese American University (LAU) introduced in Spring 2010 a “Media, Culture, and Technology” course that included some basic media literacy modules (personal communication, February 15, 2013). However, the course was later renamed “Social Media” and became predominantly oriented towards professional online journalism and Web communication skills, including online content generation and dissemination. Other attempts include injecting media literacy modules within the traditional “media and society” courses. These, however, were a far call from the goals and aims of media literacy.

In addition, various media literacy modules have existed outside academe. Several civil society groups have been actively offering media and digital literacy training since 2008. Some target youth, underprivileged, and rural communities and minorities in Lebanon, such as Hibr Lubnani (Lebanese Ink), while others pursue small businesses, professionals, journalists, and activists, such as Social Media Exchange (SMEX). Most of the civil society groups tend to focus on teaching digital and social media skills, rather than emphasizing critical competencies. Many also tend to highlight the commercial and professional benefits, rather than communal and individual empowerment values, of these digital skills. SMEX, for instance, started in 2008 to offer workshops that train civil society activists on using digital tools in advocacy (SMEX, n.d.). Significant demand for these workshops led the non-profit organization to expand and add a for-profit arm: Social Media Exchange and Company (SMEX&CO) (personal communication, February 10, 2011). Hibr Lubnani, on the other hand, has been offering workshops that balance media literacy, digital literacy, writing, and audiovisual production skills. The media literacy component of their workshops covers training on analyzing media messages and asking the core media literacy questions, but normally only occupies a small part of the program. Since 2009, it has trained over 650 people from various backgrounds (personal communication, February 14, 2013). Many of its workshops are conducted in remote rural areas and cater to underprivileged communities, although some still are centered in its Beirut headquarters and target youth aged 15 to 30. Hibr Lubnani’s team has been planning for a while to launch a full-fledged digital and media

literacy teaching and research center, but the lack of financial resources has delayed this project. Moreover, its staff note that the media literacy teaching has somewhat dwindled recently due to other exigencies and more interest in social media and production skills.

Other civil society groups have attempted to include media literacy learning within their media-related workshops. Maharat Foundation, a group that promotes free press and advocates reforming media laws in Lebanon, has offered workshops that include small components of media literacy. In 2008, a workshop on peace journalism included some message analysis and news comparison training, but such modules are not standard in their projects, as much of their capacity building initiatives focus on journalism training, media monitoring, and legal reform. The National Evangelical Union of Lebanon, too, sponsored a regional media literacy workshop for church leaders, but this was an isolated activity that focused on analyzing media messages “to reveal the values propagated vis-à-vis human rights in general and gender justice in particular” (WACC, n.d.). Finally, some individuals have also used the term media literacy to promote the reading of news among high school students, but they have been on a much smaller and infrequent scale.

Overall, the most systematic and growing efforts to generalize media literacy education in Lebanon—and the region—has been led by one university and is steadily but slowly expanding to other campuses. Civil society groups have also been a positive force in promoting media literacy training, although questions of sustainability and curricular direction raise many concerns about their future contribution. Although many schools have expressed interest in incorporating media literacy concepts and training in their curricula, they have not played a significant role so far in this domain. This makes them the natural next front for media literacy education in Lebanon.

#### **Four Years of Media Literacy at the American University of Beirut**

Four years of media literacy at AUB have provided strong evidence for its merit to Lebanese and Arab societies. A focus group with 10 undergraduates and qualitative interviews with two graduates who had taken media literacy at AUB between Fall 2009 and Fall 2012, revealed promising findings. The students came from various socio-economic and religious backgrounds. Seven were Lebanese, while the rest came each from Bahrain, Jordan, Sudan, Syria, and Turkey.

The course was an amalgam of conceptual teaching, critical thinking skills, digital skills, as well as writing intensive skills. Student participants were easily able to recall both concepts and skills they learned, even those who took it four years prior. They highlighted core media literacy topics covered, such as media representation of gender, race and minorities, news framing, ideal beauty in the media, objectification of women in advertising, media ownership and concentration of the industry, advertising and consumerism, media habits and its relationship to self-worth, and self-esteem, and a slew of disorders, such as anorexia, muscle dysmorphia, obesity, hyperactivity, etc. They also remembered the specific digital skills and the applications they learned, many of which they continued to use after class. These included audio editing (Audacity), blogging (Wordpress), video editing (Premiere Elements), Photo editing (Photoshop Elements), and the many social media they had to research and present in class.

When students were asked about the main benefits of the course, three broad headlines emerged. These are delineated below.

### ***Better writing, debating, and blogging equal higher confidence and more participation***

Students strongly believed that media literacy helped them become better writers and bloggers and that in-turn empowered them to become more confident expressing their opinions publicly and virtually.

Because the media literacy course was designated a writing intensive course, students had to write several formal and informal essays and articles. The instructor closely edited the papers and most students, had to sit with a writing tutor to review their documents and make significant corrections before resubmitting, especially the first two papers. Many students had to go through two or even three phases of corrections, and many in the focus group admitted hating the process. However, they also noted how the critical writing style and the relevant media literacy topics they wrote about made the process more exciting. More importantly, participants mentioned learning a new form of writing that empowered them. "I became more confident about expressing my ideas. I learned that my opinion did matter, as long as I supported my arguments with evidence and citations. This made me more confident about myself and about what I write," noted one student. Another said she had spent most of her college life "citing other people's ideas, but this course taught me how to also express my own observations. I learned to confidently and effectively get my point through."

Better writing skills also meant more courageous, prolific, and engaging blogging. One participant said she had maintained a blog for years before she took the course, "but all my postings were private." The course required all students to create a new public blog and post all assignments in it. "After the class, I felt confident to make my own blog public and share my ideas without worrying about what others say." Other students who had maintained a blog before the course mentioned how the digital skills they learned, especially photo editing, podcasting, and vodcasting, made their blogging more engaging. Moreover, one participant noted that the course helped her sharpen the focus of her blog, and she now blogs about media literacy matters. Not all students had blogs before the course. In fact, eight did not, and only three of them continued to blog after the course. Still, those who did have blogs prior to the course said their blogging became more frequent and more engaging through their ability to use multimedia.

In addition to writing, students valued the skills they gained from debating. The media literacy course often entailed debating controversial issues, such as religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation. One student said the course made her realize the importance of voicing her opinions, even the most controversial. "I feel more confident doing so because I can get my points through more effectively." Another student who used to avoid debates because "they often ended in controversy" said the course changed her perception. "When I used to argue, I took matters too personally and was often offended. I avoided debates and frankly there were opinions I didn't want to hear about. The discussions taught me to debate more effectively by not taking matters personally. We can disagree and still discuss matters respectfully." A third student said the discussions rarely changed her opinion, but "I learned that incorporating and giving voice to ideas and opinions that went against my beliefs is worth it. It strengthens my own arguments."

According to Jenkins (2009), media literacy helps foster a strong participatory culture, and accordingly helps youth become empowered and engaged citizens able to confidently create diverse cultural expressions. Media literacy students at AUB echoed these learning outcomes. Stronger writing led to stronger arguments, which along with debate skills led to

more confidence in engaging, exchanging, and challenging ideas openly and respectfully. And multimedia skills expanded the venues, reach, and forms of these exchanges, leading to more empowered, creative, and engaged citizens.

***Nuanced understanding of the media industry equals sophisticated understanding of media influence and processes***

Participants in the focus group eagerly expressed their developed understanding of the media industry and how it influences individuals and communities.

Media literacy encourages students to ask critical questions about a message's author, intentions, purposes, persuasion methods, creative techniques, targeted audiences, and the lifestyles and values represented (Hobbs, 2011). These critical questions were extant in students' answers. One student explained, "Media literacy untangled the relationship between the advertising and media industries and between the viewer and producer." She said it helped her understand the interaction between these entities at the micro production level and how the outcome manifested itself at the macro societal level. "Before gaining this intricate understanding, I had a blanket view about the media—a conspiracy theory, and it made me angry that I could not understand it." Another student noted her understanding of information flow and the concentration of the media industry. "It made me realize that most of the information, entertainment, and technologies we use come from the U.S. Even the local advertising concepts often turn out to be imitations from US media."

In addition, many noted their ability to view media messages in a different light—one that is critical and informed albeit tiresome. One student jokingly said "media literacy ruined the media experience for me and for my friends. I find myself critiquing every advertisement, every news piece, every song ... My friends are always telling me, just stop analyzing and enjoy it, but I can't. There are so many things that I can now see in these media messages that I never saw before." Another student said she now possesses a "different criteria for analyzing messages, especially in music." Whereas she used to only analyze the aesthetic quality of a song, she now looks into "how the lyrics represent women and certain ethnicities and the role of business and profit in shaping that song."

Moreover, students noted their systematic approach to assessing information. "I have a way to evaluate the quality of online information. Before, I knew there was something wrong with some online information I read, but I couldn't always put my finger on it." Moreover, some students revealed how they've become "self-critical" and more aware of their media habits and how dependent they are on media technologies. The students all remember the "24 hours unplugged" assignment, where they had to give up all media and surrender their cellphones for 24 hours, then write about the experience. "That was a tough experience," one student noted. "But it made me aware of how much I depend on my cellphone and how addicted I am to Facebook."

In sum, media literacy at AUB has demonstrated success in honing student's critical skills and in garnering a sophisticated and informed view of the media.

***Digital and media literacy help students understand the field and make intelligent career choices***

Many students struggle with misconceptions about the media and communication field and industry. Most students, however, expressed how a critical understanding of the

media industry helped broaden their scope of the field and consequently helped them make intelligent career choices. They also noted how the basic digital skills they learned helped them discover their passions and talents, and simultaneously build their digital portfolio.

As mentioned earlier, media literacy at AUB strongly ties together hands-on digital skills and critical competencies. For example, a media literacy lecture about the power of images is tied to photo editing training. Students write a critical essay analyzing the images of a front cover news magazine article. Additionally, they use Photoshop to alter the front cover and create three alternative illustrations for the same story. They then comment about how the new images may influence the story. Other examples include tying analysis of propaganda in documentaries to basic video editing skills, linking assessment of Web content to creating and monitoring Wikipedia pages, and analyzing news construction to creating news podcasts.

All in all, this approach helped students become adept at using digital skills, reinforced their critical skills, and informed them about careers in the media industry. “I learned that the field of media and communication is more than just journalism and anchoring,” commented one student. Another explained how confident she now is about pursuing graduate work in political communication. Yet another explained how the basic video editing skills she earned helped her realize that “editing is one of my strengths, and I hope to hone those skills and work in that domain.” Several students mentioned that media literacy was their first ever communication course. “It intrigued me to consider a major in communication more seriously,” one student said. A handful even decided to pursue graduate studies in the field based on this course.

Media literacy aims to help citizens become more critical and informed media consumers, but it also seeks to empower them to become media producers, and thereby full participants in contemporary culture (Hobbs, 2010). Media literacy at AUB, taught through both its critical analysis and digital composition aspects, has shown strong potential to build critical media consumers and producers. Moreover, because media literacy often caters to students from all majors, it indirectly helps them earn a better understanding of the various media professions, and thereby helps them make informed career choices. This could also mean attracting students to the field, a strong selling point to universities in Lebanon and the Arab world.

### **Challenges and Looking Ahead**

Media literacy in Lebanon and the Arab world remains nascent but has the potential to grow. Several challenges, however, hinder its expansion.

The two most daunting are the lack of qualified instructors and the scarcity of curricular material in Arabic. These can be overcome by training a generation of university academics, school teachers, and civil society trainers and incentivizing them to introduce media literacy to their institutions. AUB’s aforementioned summer academy is one step in that direction. The latter problem of lack of curricula is more daunting and needs a sustained long-term effort to generate research, case studies, translations, and multimedia examples. Documentaries and educational videos and case studies are also scarce. The few available tend to be in English or French. In addition, official records and reliable statistics about the industry, if available, are often difficult to access.

Another obstacle to media literacy education in Lebanon and the Arab world is the conservative reaction to some media literacy topics and teaching methods. When AUB instructors gave public lectures at other Lebanese universities, some students and academics voiced objections to certain topics raised. For example, while everyone welcomed the topic of Western media representation of Arabs, a handful objected to such topics as local media representations of religious minorities, women, and LGBT. Analyzing propaganda in Western media did not garner the same excitement as pointing out the same propaganda tactics in Arab media. Even lectures that were generally accepted generated a few objections about the teaching material used. In one public lecture, three students protested the showing of thin scantily clad women in advertisements. The images illustrated the point of unachievable beauty and the sexual objectification of women. Although these images came from the numerous advertising billboards scattered around the country, the students nevertheless thought it was inappropriate to show them in a classroom setting.

Technological limitations and lack of resources could also hinder the advancement of media literacy in Lebanon, particularly in rural and impoverished areas. AUB's media literacy course requires a digital media lab and a seminar room. Many Lebanese universities and some private schools provide such facilities, but most public schools do not.

Nevertheless, the time is ripe for advancing media literacy education in Lebanon and the Arab world. The coincidental convergence of major technological, social, and political revolutions in the region offers an excellent opportunity for such an endeavor, especially if it was organically and locally grown—with the help of many international media literacy scholars.

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