

Guest editorial: Towards a media literacy of the oppressed

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The normality of the abnormal

When reflecting on the history of my region, I find it difficult to ignore that what many around the world consider extraordinary and unusual is quite the norm in the Arab region. For a while, war, civil strife, economic collapse, terrorism, occupation, migration, unemployment, autocracy, and oppression have been nothing out of the ordinary. Even so-called states of emergency—temporary suspension of constitutional rights that give governments sweeping powers to deal effectively with extraordinary situations—have been anything but temporary—or extraordinary! In at least four Arab countries—Egypt, Syria, Algeria and Tunis, states of emergency have been continuously in place for decades. As for war and conflict, news headlines remind us daily that the conflict in Syria has now entered its eighth year, and have all but forgotten about the decades long conflicts that plagued Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, and Algeria, not to mention the over half a century long Israeli occupation of Palestine. Syrian refugees, and before that Iraqi and Palestinian refugees, get the largest share of news coverage, but the mass waves of migration from the Middle East to Western democracies started much earlier in the 19th century—well before the mass expulsion of Palestinians—developing a path for millions of Arabs to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors and settle in Europe, Australia and the Americas in pursuit of better economic and educational opportunities. Lebanese like to brag that there are twice as many Lebanese expatriates living in Brazil today than in Lebanon. And unlike the stereotypical Muslim Arab migrant that scares Western governments today, most of the Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians (collectively known as Syrians back then) who migrated to Western countries during and before the two world wars came from Christian communities and faced the same discrimination that their Muslim counterparts face today. Economic and educational opportunities in the Arab region are no different. Except for oil-rich US-protected Gulf states, every other Arab country is perpetually in a state of economic turmoil, and poverty is widely spread in even the richest of Arab states. Severe limits on freedoms of the press are decades older than Freedom House's "Freedom of the Press" index, which annually shows the Arab region in the darkest colors the index has to offer.¹

A different state of reality

I often facetiously tell my US- and EU-based colleagues that some emerging media literacy issues they tackle are First World problems that we would love to deal with once we get rid of... say ISIS and dictatorship. While their issues merit the genuine attention of media literacy scholars, it's hard to see them as priorities in our context. But this is not necessarily unique to the Arab region, as many colleagues from Latin America, South and South-East Asia and other regions—not to mention minorities living in rich countries—remind me.

So, when it comes to promoting and developing media literacy in the Arab region, one is faced with some dilemmas. The most advanced media literacy curricula and scholarship have historically developed in relatively stable Western democracies with defined economies and political cultures and largely addressed these societies' problems. Up until recently, rarely has media literacy dealt with other contexts, particularly fragile states that are experiencing chronic conflict, terrorism, war, migration, occupation, and a constant state of economic turmoil. Therefore, importing Western media literacy curricula and pouring them into the containers of Arab universities *en masse* will guarantee failure and the branding of media literacy as another strand of Western cultural colonialism, if not conspiracy. But rejecting the decades of advancement in media literacy, just because they developed in the West, and starting from zero in a region that never knew the term before 2009, is also unrealistic and inefficient.

Then, how do we reinvent a conception of media literacy for a particularly distinct state of reality? What name could we offer that is not too limiting geographically, not too broad to be meaningless, and yet something theoretically operational, practically implementable, and lasting beyond a slogan? A media literacy "for the rest of the world" is too broad. A media literacy for the "Arab world" is too geographically and ethnically limiting and lumps up all Arab countries and groups together ignoring the vast differences between them—essentially recreating an Orientalist frame. A media literacy of war and conflict excludes many issues not necessarily related to war, such as economic instability, autocracy, and economic-based migration and oppression. A media literacy of the Third World, developing world, or countries in transition—aside from it being Western centric—assumes we are moving in the right direction towards becoming a developed country—as defined by dominant global powers. Lately "vulnerable states" has become a common term in political discourse. However, a media literacy of vulnerable states or even of "autocracies" focuses on the political and economic systems while it de-emphasizes culture, ignores external influences, and assumes autocracy is constant. On the other hand, a "postcolonial media literacy" sounds attractive but only partially fitting with the needs of a movement that pushes pedagogy beyond the fences of literary criticism and into the applied activism and social movement arena and towards building a better future and struggling for social justice. A postcolonial frame risks indulging in isolated

ivory-tower thinking sometimes even devoid of praxis and overemphasizing external and historic factors—often being fixated on blaming the “West” and pitting “us” as “their” victims in perpetuity, while ignoring internal ills and underestimating the emancipatory potential of local communities. It also creates a false sense of accomplishment that accompanies the conclusion of a purely academic critique, often too inaccessible and sometimes too removed from the realities of local communities.

Very closely stands an approach more useful for this purpose, consistent with pedagogical thinking, rich with theoretical complexity, sufficiently pragmatic, and refreshingly egalitarian. Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers an emancipatory form of education that focuses the energy on praxis and ties it to local priorities.

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.²

A *Media Literacy of the Oppressed* offers enough flexibility and broadness yet focuses on a certain human condition. It examines external and internal problems, is simultaneously political, cultural, economic, and historical, as well as encompassing diverse factors and groups, be it gender, race, sexuality, religion, nationality, etc. Most importantly, a media literacy of the oppressed grounds itself organically in the present and the local, orients its sight to the future, and offers hope, direction and path. More than a state of being, it is a methodical struggle for transformation and liberation in a truly participatory and democratic fashion. It doesn’t obsess with attacking oppressors but sets as the greatest task of the oppressed “to liberate themselves and their oppressors.”³ It is a humanistic approach to “education as the practice of freedom.”⁴

A media literacy of the oppressed reframes existing concepts and competencies, engages local communities in the reinvention of media literacy, integrates media literacy critical reading and writing/production as well as participatory activism, prioritizes problems of the oppressed communities, and introduces new concepts and issues that address these communities and enriches media literacy as a whole. It critiques and simultaneously borrows from the external. It roots itself in the local without being blind to indigenous problems. It struggles for freedom and social justice at the level of the local as well as the global.

Repurposing, reframing and reinventing media literacy

Media literacy evolved in countries where the political paradigm is plotted along a one dimensional left-middle-right political spectrum, and where media literacy is often assumed (accused?) to be liberally biased. Some media literacy scholars would also advocate positioning it as a counter force against neoliberalism. That may work well in these contexts. However, in many Arab counties, such paradigm is too simplistic and misleading. In Lebanon, for instance, a sectarian political party that represents a religious minority and is led by a feudal family calls itself the Progressive Socialist Party. Other examples in the same country abound. Many of these political groups are the direct outcomes of postcolonial Arab states and continue to get their protection from external powers and ensure their wealth and continuity from internal political, economic and cultural arrangements. A media literacy of the oppressed would better be positioned as a liberating movement by critiquing post-colonialism and its oppressive internal and external forces, as well as constructing counter narratives and authentic political and cultural projects that serve and empower the local communities. These include changing discriminatory laws that help maintain the status quo, inventing new economic opportunities that empower local communities, and inspiring new forms of knowledge that reach diverse local communities.

Media literacy has often dealt with civic engagement and promoted the practice of democratic rights through voting, freedom of expression, and political participation. A media literacy of the oppressed extends this concept to help communities maneuver autocracies and 'Anocracies'—states that are part democratic and part autocratic, characterized by instability and are often susceptible to outbreaks in conflict and abrupt and violent change in leadership. A media literacy of the oppressed prepares citizens and communities in these countries for handling peak moments of media incitement and safely maneuvering narrow margins of freedom, while understanding that silence and inaction amounts to consent. Several Arab countries, such as Jordan and Egypt, are ruled by autocratic regimes but also have some form of elections (that albeit serve the status-quo) and narrow margins of press freedoms and dynamic emerging youth movements. How can media literacy empower these youth activists to transform their lives and increase the margins of freedom without necessarily plunging their countries into civil strife?

One of the most common lessons in media literacy curricula focuses on the political economy of media and the concentration in ownership of the industry. But such conceptions of political economy emerged in Capitalist societies with defined characteristics. A media literacy of the oppressed would redefine such concepts to better address different capitalist and non-capitalist economic systems. For instance, Lebanon's unrestrained capitalist economy is rooted in its sectarian and clientelist system, and its media are largely bankrolled by local and

regional hegemonic powers. Syria's war economy imposes military ownership on its media, which thereby creates ephemeral media institutions that ebb and flow with the victories and defeats of their military patrons. Oil-dependent Arab Gulf economies use their wealth to ensure near complete hegemonic dominance over the Arab media systems, including internet service providers, mobile operators and satellite services. Simultaneously, Western media concentrations continue to be relevant in this context, as many Arab youth avidly consume Western, especially US, media.⁵ Since 2013, we have been using a recycled media literacy assignment developed with US colleagues that focuses on media ownership concentration. It asks students to randomly select a sample from their music library, research the label owners, and figure out the proportion of major label companies compared to independent labels they listen to. Unsurprisingly, in the US most students conclude that the majority of their music is owed by one of the three major labels (Universal, Sony and Warner. ...). However, we were surprised to also find out that most Arab students reach the same conclusion about their music library.⁶

Typical media literacy curricula cover media stereotypes and racism, and some have included references to Edward Said's Orientalism when it comes to representations of the Arab world. Such curricula, while still valid in any context, tend to focus on external stereotyping and racism, and somewhat neglect internal forms of racism and stereotypes (and self-stereotyping) and exclude important forms of discrimination based on religion and sect. Despite often criticizing hegemonic Western media for the racist and stereotypical representations of Arabs, Middle Easterners and Muslims, Arab media themselves offer a plethora of discriminatory practices against local minorities and foreign laborers. Some Arab media symbolically annihilate their own minorities and tolerate sectarian hate speech, homophobia, sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism. Even media in relatively pluralistic countries, such as Lebanon, tend to collectively create more divisions and a fractured public sphere, rather than offer a pluralistically diverse picture.

Although today many around the world advocate for religious tolerance and understanding, such calls tend to focus on how the West can better understand Islam. From an inside Arab perspective, there is plenty of ignorance of religious beliefs to go around internally. Many local Arab Christians and Muslims (and others) are ignorant about each other's beliefs and religions, and even people from the same religion have very limited understanding of other sects (e.g. Sunnis and Shia, Maronites and Orthodox, Alawites and Druze, etc.)—which offers rich opportunities for corrupt political manipulation and identity politics. As the educational system has shied away from addressing this sensitive issue, media literacy can offer an effective framework to achieve higher religious literacy, locally and in the long term globally.

A media literacy of the oppressed will be cognizant of the individualist philosophy that

dominates Western media literacy pedagogies, compared to a communitarian philosophy that emphasizes empowering communities. Such an approach would acknowledge shared collective memory, common grievances, and group identities. Take for instance the Saix-Picot agreement and the Balfour Declaration and their role in creating the modern map of the Middle East and subsequently its chronic problems. This includes historical massacres between local communities in the Levant, which continue to fuel sectarian hatred and civil strife, as well as nationalistic ideologies (e.g. Pan-Arab, Pan-Syrian), separatist aspirations of minorities (e.g. Kurds), and independence, decolonization, and liberation efforts (e.g. Palestinians).

Such a conception also critiques the individualist post-feminist rhetoric and emphasizes a communal feminism that reframes women's rights and gender equality from a local perspective, but without neglecting the external pressure of cultural production mechanisms that impose a sexually objectified and Westernized stereotype of women in visual culture. And instead of the Islamophobic discussion about the Hijab, a more sophisticated debate will prevail about the complexity of such cultural attire in objectifying women—when imposed to hide women's sexuality—while simultaneously liberating them from the modern obsession with physical—sexual—beauty and image. Similarly, topics that are often addressed in the typical Orientalist manner, such as honor killing and child marriage, will be afforded a more authentic analysis to understand the legal, cultural, economic and religious dimensions that enable them.

Given the aforementioned condition of perpetual war and the strong relationship between modern warfare and media, a media literacy of the oppressed must carve a large space for research and teaching about war and conflict, especially the symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism. Questions in this area abound. How do non-state actors, such as ISIS, use media/terrorism to gain exposure and credibility and recruit supporters?⁷ What implications does this have on the work of journalists, activists, and citizens? What media literacy tools and competencies can we use to counter such forms of violent extremism, youth radicalization, fundamentalist recruitment efforts, and cultural polarization? Moreover, how can we understand populism and demagoguery, which have recently swept Western democracies, within the context of authoritarianism, violent extremism, and non-state actors?

Similarly, a media literacy of the oppressed must address the chronic situation of refugees and people living under war conditions. Media literacy scholars must help guide the millions of dollars and hours invested in helping refugees by conducting research aimed at empowering these communities with digital competencies and critical media literacies. Outdated research and misconceptions about refugees is causing the misplacement of help aimed at the displaced. International aid and development money continues to focus on radio and print media when research shows that refugees have better access to Satellite TV and internet over mobile.⁸ Representation of refugees in international and local media is another pressing matter. While

racist representation of refugees in mainstream global media and online is ubiquitous, studying and critiquing it by local Arab communities keeps this as an external and distant problem, when there are plenty of local examples of racism based on internal prejudices and sectarian stereotypes of refugees. Internal hate speech directed at Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, for instance, is based mainly on religious sectarianism.

It's not sufficient in the context of the oppressed to stop at critical reading and analysis of media. A media literacy of the oppressed is misguided without praxis. Digital competencies for inhabitants, especially those living in conflict zones, should go hand-in-hand with the critical skills. Furthermore, civic engagement and activism become key to media literacy education, as the pedagogies of the oppressed can't be neutral. Training on digital tools within the context of activism must be adjusted to the needs of the locale. More importantly, approaches to teaching these tools should aim to create a spirit of self-sufficiency, where the trainees are capable of learning, applying and later teaching new tools and concepts independently.

Special care should be applied in post-conflict and transition states, where balancing pluralism and political stability of weak states is important, in order not to fall back into autocratic tendencies. As such, a pedagogy of the oppressed approach will lead to the instigation of media literate communities as the fifth estate, monitoring the pluralist media, which may abuse their privileges and freedom, and acting as a deterrent to the authoritarian tendencies of post-conflict governments. It will also help minority communities who have little access to established media to engage in the national and international discussions by effectively communicating their views and interests, instead of having to resort to violent means to gain attention—which sometimes tends to be terrorist acts that vie for media exposure. As an added value these same communities can help counter fundamentalist, extremist, and radicalized rhetoric and provide alternative narratives that avoid plunging their communities back into civil strife. The aim is to build media literate, digitally capable, civically engaged and politically active communities, capable of mediating between the needs for political stability and safety, and the advantages of pluralism, diversity and freedom of expression.

Overall, the mightiest challenge remains to develop such media literacy where it doesn't exist, and in these contexts a media literacy of the oppressed approach ensures that the seeds of such efforts are rooted in firm local grounds and not simply imported as external ideas that cannot grow and flourish among local communities. Practically, this means starting with building capacity using established external curricula, research and experts, when local curricula and experts don't exist. But then moving quickly towards growing locally rooted, organically developed, and contextually relevant media literacy programs.

The Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB) is an exploratory example of such effort.⁹ Just a few years ago, there were only two elite private universities in the

Arab world that taught (predominantly Western) media literacy. Founded and led by local media literacy educators and students, MDLAB started with establishing annual intensive workshops. The first stage relied on the help of international colleagues committed to this form of teaching, especially participants of the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, but also on passionate scholars from local Arab universities. At every opportunity, it engaged local scholars, students, activists, journalists and other participants in discussions about the priorities, approaches, and methods of media literacy that serve their communities and interests. Year-round, it helped local students, academics, activists and journalists independently develop syllabi and lesson plans, establish research agendas, manoeuvre tedious bureaucracies of Arab educational systems,¹⁰ promote the advantages of media literacy education in schools, universities and civil society organizations, and build awareness of its importance across society. The academy essentially (and unknowingly) followed Freire's two stages: First, local advocates of media literacy unveiled limits of existing curricula and through the praxis committed themselves to its transformation, and in the second stage, participants of MDLAB who reinvented their own media literacy curricula, lessons, and plans, independently implemented them in their communities for their authentic interests, and then led the development, reinvention, and spread of this liberating pedagogy. Today, over 30 Arab universities and a dozen schools offer various media literacy courses and modules, and many activists conduct regular workshops in their communities.¹¹ Vibrant networks of Arab media literacy educators and activists operate independently in their own countries, organizing conferences and workshops, and producing MA and PhD theses focused on media literacy. Several national media literacy initiatives have also emerged, as a result, including in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, and Kuwait.

The road ahead is still long and thorny before a true media literacy of liberation effectively help effect real and significant change in Arab societies. Ideas also remain tentative, a work in progress, and need further elaboration and rigorous methodology. Much of what we've done has been learning from trial and (a plethora of) error, and building on experience and knowledge we garnered predominantly from Western education and texts, but most importantly garnering ideas from the people who stand to benefit the most from it—an essential step in building a pedagogy of liberation.

Editorial note:

This issue of the *Media Education Research Journal*, reflects the wide and varied scope – and the current state-of-play – of media literacy research across our international community of scholars and practitioners. We are pleased to feature articles in this edition on the use of digital media in Italian classrooms, as well as pedagogies of social justice and a critique

of current media literacy thinking from the perspective of interactive documentary, in UK Higher Education. From the US, a study examines how music and multimedia can support the development of literacy skills in bi-lingual students. Additionally, we present work which revisits Roland Barthes, via photo-journalism and a meditation on research ethics when working with vulnerable research participants. Our research forum piece this issue examines how social media can be a means to build current affairs engagement in students. Finally, we have two book reviews: Caliendo Gandini's *Qualitative Research in Digital Environments*; and we revisit John Berger's 'canonical' *Ways of Seeing*.

Footnotes

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9. Melki, Jad. (2013). Sowing The Seeds Of Digital And Media Literacy In Lebanon And The Arab World: The importance of a locally grown and sustainable curriculum. In Belinha De Abreu and Paul Mihailidis (Eds.), *Media Literacy Education in Action: Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Routledge.
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