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Media and Information Literacy Among Millennials and Generation Z in the Arab World

Filling the gap through a skill-based approach

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Executive Summary

Digital and media literacy are recognized as tools of particular importance in strengthening young people's civic participation and understanding of the news. This has become increasingly important with the proliferation of mis/disinformation especially on digital platforms. This policy paper is based on a study on media and information literacy among Millennials (those between 23-39 years of age) and Generation Z (those who are 22 or younger) in the UAE. The UAE, which has population of over 9.5 million of which more than 88 percent are expatriates, many from other Arab countries, is a microcosm of the Arab world. As such findings of the study can also be construed as a representation of the broader of the region. The study reveals a lack of media literacy skills which is very disconcerting in this age where misinformation and disinformation are very rife. The findings of the study highlight the need for more efforts to develop media literacy skills among people, especially young people in this part of the world. This resonates with findings from previous studies on media literacy in Western contexts, where Millennials and Generation Z were found to generally lack the ability to question, analyze, and authenticate information found online, in print, or any media format.

This policy paper recommends the development and introduction of formal media and information literacy programs into school curricula. Consequently, this would enable youth in the region to develop their ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create content, skills necessary to navigate the deluge of media content and information in the digital age.

Rationale for Action on the Issue: A Backdrop

Disinformation campaigns and strategies are widely used in developed and developing countries and micro-targeting techniques have become rampant on new media platforms in an attempt to sway voters and public opinion. Youth are especially susceptible victims to these micro-targeting techniques as they are the primary users of new media and for the most part may lack the necessary skills needed to assess and evaluate content.

Globally, Millennials and Generation Z get their news from multiple news platforms. They consult online news sources in addition to traditional offline sources. Furthermore, younger people worldwide are significantly consuming less news than previous generations.

Findings from (a 2010 UNESCO commissioned) study examining Arab youth and their media consumption habits, revealed that Millennials and Generation Z in the region share many characteristics with their counterparts elsewhere:
› First, they are highly adept at using new media.
› Second, while they do spend large amounts of time consuming both new and traditional media they are not necessarily content producers.
› Third, they primarily use media for entertainment, connecting with their social circles, to complete schoolwork, but less often for civic engagement.

Several studies conducted in Western countries suggest that user-generated content creation is driven by social utility motivations e.g. interacting with friends or family and/or as a form of self-expression, entertainment, passing time, information or professional advancement.

The Arab world does not have an established tradition of media and information literacy programs, unlike Western countries where such programs have been incorporated into school curricula for decades. In the Gulf, especially the UAE, youth have access to some of the best media technologies and innovations in the world. This situation poses an interesting anomaly
emphasizing the urgent need to develop media and information literacy programs. This rationale for action (on the part of policymakers, NGOs and other civic institutions) to address the shortfall in media and information literacy programs across the region, is based on the findings of a study conducted in the United Arab Emirates. With a huge expatriate workforce, many from the Middle East, the UAE is a miniature representation of the Arab world.

The Arab world in the study is defined as the 22-Arabic speaking countries which are members of the Arab League. These 22 Arab-states combined have a population of 423 million people, half of which are below the age of 25. Youth in the study are operationalized as Millennials between the ages of 23-38 years and Generation Z as those between ages 22 years and younger. The researchers' findings indicate that media literacy skills are lacking among members of these 2 groups in the UAE. Given the fact that the UAE is a microcosm of the region, it is safe to infer that a similar context is prevalent in other Arab countries.

Proposed Policy Options

There are several challenges media consumers, especially young media consumers, face. The ease of access to information and uninterrupted internet connectivity bombards youth with information from myriad of sources, some of which comes from trustworthy and credible while others are not. The information overload presents a clear and present danger when media and information are channeled by various actors through different platforms, from internet-based news outlets to Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter, to youth who may lack the literacy skills to make sense of the information glut. Media and information literacy skills in tandem with critical thinking skills need to be developed among young people in the Arab world. Cultivating such skills will enable young audience members to be more proactive in accessing and evaluating the validity and reliability of news.

Thus, the following policy options are considered in addressing the media and information literacy programs in the Arab world:
› Develop national media and information literacy programs targeting different audiences who may have different gaps and needs across respective countries.
› Develop specific media and information literacy programs aimed at developing critical thinking skills targeting youth.
› Involve international and local NGOs in the media and information literacy action plans so that relevant strategies can be implemented.
› Ensure that the academic community is an integral part in the development of the objectives, strategies, and tactics necessary for the design of media and information literacy programs.
› Research and evaluate the outcomes of these media and information literacy programs.

Policy Recommendations

It is recommended that the development of media and information literacy skills for children and youth be through formal programs embedded in school curricula. This will equip young people with the necessary skills to understand, analyze, and evaluate media content. Media scholars have long stressed the need for audiences

to have interpretive skills enabling them to decode content. The ability to decode content has been considered a critical component of media literacy.

In view of this, the following policy recommendations are proposed:
› Introduction of media and information literacy programs starting at the elementary level
› The foci of these media and information literacy programs would be a skilled-based approach aimed at developing the ability to:
  › access,
  › analyze,
  › evaluate,
  › create messages in different media platforms.

Other Considerations

The policy recommendations proposed in this paper may face several challenges/obstacles given the political, economic, and social context in the Arab region.

First, while there has been a remarkable progress in the region pertaining to educational indicators, the region is not one cohesive unit. As detailed in a 2011 UN report, there are still several issues looming in different parts of the region:
› high illiteracy rates among youth (reaching 16.6%),
› student dropouts from primary education,
› low enrolment of girls in comparison to boys,
› deterioration of education quality,
› and a general mismatch between education curricula and the labor market's skill demands.

Second, media and information literacy programs are not difficult to design but their implementation into educational systems will require Arab governments to allocate funds. For many Arab governments that maybe an issue given their weak economies and lack of monies. International Governmental Organizations (IGOs) and NGOs may step in to cover a part of the funding for these programs alongside the respective Arab governments. It is recommended that local experts in education, communication, and instructional design be part of the process to ensure that governments/countries are invested in the programs. Moreover, this maintains the sovereignty of involved countries.

Third, media and information literacy programs are based upon instilling critical thinking skills and the questioning/evaluation of content. Given the current political context in most of the region, this might be seen as a way to invoke unrest or change. In order to overcome this obstacle, it needs to be stressed that programs and curricular content will be strictly for educational purposes. The main objective of the curricula is to enable citizens, especially young ones, in the Arab region to have the necessary skills to evaluate and assess information and not to fall into dangerous pitfalls of mis/disinformation.

The success in implementing the proposed media and information literacy programs is contingent on a serious partnership between governments in the region, local and international experts, as well as civil society organizations/NGOs and IGOs. The benefits reaped from the design and implementation of such programs will have a positive impact in combatting mis/disinformation at the local and global levels.

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