Abolish censorship and adopt critical media literacy: A proactive approach to media and youth in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the dominant patronizing approach to youth and media in the Middle East and argues that the calls for censorship of youth media exposure are obsolete and counterproductive. It argues that although censorship advocates have a legitimate concern over media risks, their approaches are ineffective, short-lived and alienating, disregarding the potential that media hold for young people. The author believes that elites in MENA should shift their focus to empower youth to use media to learn; to voice their worldviews and experiences; and to work for the betterment of themselves and their societies. The paper recommends two strategies:1) the adoption of a proactive approach towards youth and media through the introduction of critical media literacy in education in MENA, and 2) the collaboration between the government, businesses, and the rest of society to advance the pedagogical resources of critical media literacy for Arabic speaking youth and educators.

Keywords: *critical media literacy, MENA, Arab youth, censorship, media risks and opportunities.*

BACKGROUND

There are about two hundred million young people (aged 15-20 years) in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2019) who can benefit from critical media literacy. Every day, they navigate media environments that are over-saturated with content, highly politicized, volatile, and polarized. Due to young people's technological fluency in reaching blocked content, it seems inevitable that youth in the region will continue to use media for engaging with communities beyond the control of their parents, teachers, or the government.

Although the global interest in media literacy has increased tremendously in the past few years with the growing concern over the spread of propaganda, misinformation (unintentional), and disinformation (intentional) around the world since 2016 (Bulger & Davison, 2018), there is a scarcity of adequate knowledge on Arab youth's uses and preferences towards media content and platforms that preclude the advancement of media literacy education and programs (Melki, 2014; 2015). Research is also lacking on Arab youth's current critical media literacy rates and knowledge gaps. There is an emerging interest in Arab audience media use since the Arab Spring (Dennis et al., 2016; Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government 2012, & 2013). This research is valuable and indicative although it does not focus on youth. Notably, research on media use in MENA "remain[s] rare and suffer[s] numerous methodological problems" (Melki, 2015, p. 16), which undermines its potential to inform the development of media literacy curriculum.

This essay argues that political and social elites in the MENA region should recognize the possibilities that Internet-based content and networks offer for learning, self-advancement, and the social good. These opportunities include signing up for online courses, navigating professional development opportunities, engaging in voluntary wok opportunities, engaging in activities of co-learning and knowledge and resources exchange, etc. The author believes critical media literacy in the MENA region should be promoted in order to tap into the Internet's potential for job search and learning, while minimizing threats facing youth online, such as misinformation, surveillance and cyberbullying. A proactive approach will prepare youth for critical and informed engagement with the "network

society" (Castells, 1997; 2004; 2012), empowering them to cultivate personally tailored media use, engage in critical content analysis, and make informed interpretations of media messages. Critical media literacy can provide knowledge about media industries and skills for participating in professional media practices and in utilizing media resources to advance personal growth and professional development.

Critical Media Literacy

There is an increasing global interest in media literacy as an essential component of future education, although there is sometimes little consensus over what it means or what forms it should take to enhance personal growth and social advancement while decreasing risks of manipulation and exploitation (Potter, 2010; Hobbs, 2011). The dynamic nature of the media scene and the definition of media as the technological infrastructure mediating social reality makes it harder to grasp all aspects related to critical media engagement in one encompassing definition. Media scholars approach the conceptualization of media literacy from different perspectives including media fluency or the ability to produce, access and interpret media messages; critical civic and democratic engagement with media content (Livingstone, 2004; Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Mihailidis, 2011 & 2013; Martens, & Hobbs, 2015; UNESCO, 2011); information appropriation, utilization and reproduction; etc. (Siverblatt & Eliceiri, 1997; Sholle & Denski, 1995; Adams & Hamm, 2001; Hobbs, 2001 & 2007).

UNESCO (2011) recommends five outcomes for any media literacy curriculum. They include abilities to 1) "understand the role and function of media in democratic societies," 2) "critically evaluate media content in the light of media function," 3) "engage with media for self-expression and democratic participation," 4) "review skills needed to produce user-generated content," 5) "review skills (including ICTs skills) needed to produce user-generated content" (p. 18). In the current new media ecosystem, the same content could be used on social media, online websites, mobile applications, or on television simultaneously.

The convergence of media content and formats are making it necessary to explore major media platforms in any media literacy program.[1]

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[1] The media ecosystem is a term derived from media ecology, driven from Canadian philosopher Marshal McLuhan (1911-1980) and advanced by Neil Postman (1970) as the study of media environment. The term is recently more current with the technological revolution that changed the media infrastructure and its environments.

Defining media as an ecosystem justifies Potter's (2010) proposition on media literacy as a "never complete" process. This ecosystem requires the development of a multimodal approach to media literacy (Potter, 2010), especially as older media habits of Arab youth carryover to the Internet (Melki, 2015). Potter (2010) argues that, as networks, structures, and processes are constantly changing, being media literate is an ongoing effort, which requires considerable study, planning, and collaboration. Renee Hobbs (2011) notes that the past decade has witnessed a global surge in innovative and creative research on media literacy from various fields but with limited agreement on what type of media literacy practice best serves young people.

The word "critical" signals a special approach to media literacy that shifts the focus from the access, use and produce triangle (Park 2012) and focuses on the critical engagement of the learner. It can be argued that critical media literacy places media consumers in a more distant position that is largely inquisitive and skeptical. This critical position should enable the learner to question textual meaning, spurring him or her to examine the creator's identity, motivations, and intentions.

Critical media literacy comprises "an education for life" (Masterman, 2010, para 1). It is a subject that is formally taught at schools in many countries around the world as a core course in addition to math, science, social studies, and languages (Kellner & Share, 2007 & 2019). Critical media literacy education steers youth towards informed targeted media usage, recognizing media as an indispensable source of social (Luke, 1999) and academic learning (Grigoryan, & King, 2008), health support (Higgins, & Begoray, 2012) and prosperity.

Critical media literacy also requires validating messages' factuality, asking questions about authors' biases, and consequences (personal and collective, emotional and cognitive) for consumers. This critical position requires an awareness of the production processes of media messages and the subjectivity of both the message's author and receiver. Being critical does not only separate the user from the text, industry, and sender but also detaches the reader from herself and requires her to step aside and think of her choice, interest, motivation, investment, and benefit in light of her personal growth (Potter, 2010).

Critical media literacy has the potential to help youth better understand their place in society with its power inequalities. It can be used positively in teaching them a variety of principles including multiculturalism, coexistence, and social justice. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) recognizes critical media literacy as an essential ingredient for building bridges between cultures and peoples and as an "opportunity for the development of peacebuilding initiatives," (UN Chronicle, 2017, para 2) by challenging ideological polarization and religious extremism. Therefore, critical media literacy is an educational imperative for twenty-first century citizens.

The ultimate goal of critical media literacy is to achieve the "critical autonomy" of the learner (Masterman, 1985, p. 25). It should aim to "liberate pupils from the expertise of the teacher, and to challenge the dominant hierarchical transmission of knowledge" beyond the classroom and away from home (Masterman, 2010, para 1). Advocates of advancing critical media literacy through formal educational institutions argue that "individuals are often not aware that they are being educated and positioned by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and is absorbed unconsciously" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 4).

The critical learner is qualified to read through power structures and to employ her own critical position to decode media messages. Critical media literacy includes the understanding of hegemony, the location of the message sender/composer within existing hierarchies, and the sender's political and social agenda.

Critical questions are almost a taboo in the Arab culture as it is largely considered disrespectful to authority figures. Critical education, as a knowledge acquisition exercise, requires the implementation of "democratic values" (United Nations Development Programme & Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2003). These values are at the odds of neopatriarchal structures of knowledge in the Arab countries as raised by Hisham Sharabi (1998), who describes knowledge as moving from top-down within national and family systems. This reality is largely shifting with the advancement of media technologies.

The state of media and information literacy in MENA

There is a broadening interest in media literacy education and the status of media literacy in the Arab countries amongst academics and international organizations. This is a delayed response to a global trend in focusing on youth and adults' media use, responses, and literacies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for instance, organized several fora in

Beirut, Cairo, Amman and Ramallah focused on media literacy and youth (UNESCO 2015; 2016). The organization has also introduced an open access media and information literacy (MIL) manual for teachers (Wilson et al., 2011) which is published in eleven languages including Arabic.

In collaboration with Nordic Information Center for Media and Communication Research (NORDICOM), UNESCO published its 2016 Yearbook that focused on "opportunities for media and information literacy in the Middle East and North Africa" (Abu-Fadil et al., 2016). This comes a few years after the European Union has supported a longitudinal study on children (9-16 year-olds) online risks and opportunities in twenty-five countries across the continent (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011).

In the MENA region, critical media literacy was taught in higher education only on a few campuses as of 2013 (Abu-Ourabi, 2013). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this number has increased in the past few years, although more research is necessary to provide a definitive statement. University courses on media literacy as part of the liberal arts education have for almost a decade been taught at the American University of Sharjah and the American University of Beirut (AUB). With the support of Open Society Foundation in 2013, AUB professor, Jad Melki, launched a summer media literacy academy," Media Literacy Lab," in Beirut to boost both academics' and students' critical and digital media literacies (Melki, 2015). In 2015, Melki reported that more Arab universities had either introduced courses on media literacy or included media literacy modules in their curricula (Melki, 2015). There is no recent evidence that other universities plan to introduce media literacy courses in their study plans.

Informal evidence of critical media literacy was indicated in several observations in academic work that focused on youth engagement during the early days of the Arab Spring. Lynch (2011) highlights the development of skills and competencies in the media literacy trio of access, use, and production, in addition to other skills necessary for the free flow of information. Although these literacies are gained by a small number of activists, the fact that many of them were self-taught keeps the promise for English speaking youth to advance their literacy depending on the variety of sources available and considering they are motivated to do so.

Even in countries where media literacy is regularly taught, such as in the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon, Melki (2015) found that "Arab youth tend to be highly uncritical and unaware of social media risks, an indication of low levels of critical media literacy and poor knowledge of online media threats" (p. 20). He argues that "participants associate the internet with entertainment, personal utility, and expression, while they disassociate it from government surveillance, privacy threats, personal corruption, and political activism" (2015, p. 25). This suggests that the current media literacy curricula are not entirely comprehensive. Participants' responses revealed the lack of understanding of risks for their privacy and personal safety, which is especially worrisome considering the revival of authoritarian regimes in the region. Failing to associate the Internet with government surveillance (BBC News, 2017) undermines the ability of young citizens and activists to protect their personal data and may expose them to state brutality and persecution (McLaughlin, 2016).

A more proactive approach to critical media literacy can help learners respond to many challenges facing youth, families, and country elites in the MENA region, especially monolinguals, who face social, economic, and political marginalization (Abu-Fadil, Torrent & Grizzle, 2016).

Media and youth in MENA

Youth in the region are heavy Internet users and often have better technology skills than both their parents and teachers. Arab youth use new technologies to circumvent governmental and parental controls, accessing content deemed politically, socially, and/or morally threatening (Black, 2009). It is evident that censorship, as a strategy for protecting youth, lacks effectiveness as youngsters are increasingly using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and neighboring country Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to access blocked or censored Internet content (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

For particularly educated urban youth, Internet access and usage is universal (Lynch, 2011). Unfortunately, although youth are fluent in Internet access, they lack essential aspects of critical media literacy as they "tend to overly trust online content" (Melki, 2015, p. 26) and are not fully aware of surveillance risks and the values of their online time, privacy, and security.

Historically, in MENA, pessimism is more common with regards to media, as it is largely seen as an outside threat to the Arab and Muslim cultures, identities, and values (AlJada'a, 2011; Christou, & Ioannidou, 2014;

Al-Khataibeh, 2017; Fida, 2018). The idea that media are "weaponized by the imperial powers," – the "enemies" of the Arab nation that work to eradicate youth's morality and subvert their religious beliefs, is a very widespread argument amongst common men and women in the region (AlBaih, 2015).

Although many of the concerns regarding threats and risks of media are legitimate and even globally shared (Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Kline, Stewart, & Murphy 2006), some of the public conversations in the MENA region appear overly critical. One of the most recent panics over media risks to youth involved an outcry from a variety of public actors in Jordan condemning a Netflix original TV series called *Jinn* (*Genies* in English). The major concern was the intimate scenes (kissing) and frequent swearing in the series. Many Jordanians argued that the series does not represent the country's youth, as it depicts "loose morals" and encourages "inappropriate behaviour" (Luck, 2019, para 1).

There are more than 421 million Arabic speakers around the world; only one-third of this number have access to the Internet (World Internet Stats, 2017). Youth between 15-20 years old in the Arab countries make up about 30% of the population (Arab Human Development Report, 2016), which means two hundred million as of 2018 (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2019). At the same time, human development in education and health achieved in the Arab countries during the first decade of the twenty-first century has declined to more than 50% in the past few years, mainly between 2010 and 2014 (Arab Human Development Report, 2016). Using an economic development lens, "two features of the Arab region come into stark relief: the failures of education to prepare Arab youth for employment in the global economy and the disproportionate and relatively high levels of youth unemployment across the region" (Murphy, 2012, p. 8). High discrepancies in what constitutes quality within public and private education exacerbates the problem as the public curricula are lagging behind global trends (Murphy, 2012).

Large segments of Arab youth nowadays receive education that does not qualify them for working in the global or national markets and falls short of providing necessary skills and competencies (World Bank, 2008). As a result of more than a decade of civil war, religious sectarianism, political crisis, terrorism, bot wars, and misinformation (Stubbs, Paul, & Khalid, 2018), Arab youth are facing enormous impediments to their pursuit of knowledge and personal growth "across the broadest range of institutions, resulting in multiple forms of cultural, social, economic, and political exclusion" (Arab Human Development Report, 2016). Moreover, the region is witnessing one of the highest displacement waves in history since World War II.

The United Nations Refugee Agency reports the displacement of more than 68 million people, 25 million under eighteen years and 85% of the displaced people are in developing countries. Countries with the highest percentage of displacement globally are Syria and Sudan (UNHCR, 2017). In this context, the Internet presents one of the most immediate forces that is shaping youth's worldviews and self-views. Where it could arguably increase one's sense of marginalization, it also presents an abundance of possibilities to respond to this lack of opportunity.

Remarkably, "social media technologies today are increasingly being acknowledged by different Arab government organizations as core enablers for inclusive policy formulation and better service delivery on an institutional level" (Dubai School of Government, 2013, p. 1) including youth education and empowerment programs. Barsoum (2015) pinpoints the multiple untapped potentials of social media beyond their important role in citizen feedback and extend to areas of employment, health, and skill building. These include "job search tools, labor market information dissemination, and a myriad of awareness activities related to young people's skill building, health, and awareness" (Barsoum, 2012, p. 51). These and other potentials can be tapped into if policymakers and elites shift their focuses from protecting youth from media to enabling them to use it for learning, self-expression, and social good.

A protective approach to youth and digital media on the internet

Policymakers, academics, technology leaders, parents, and many community leaders in the MENA have been preoccupied with media and its powerful impact on young people since the surge of satellite TV channels in the 1990s. Currently, the increase in access to the Internet prompted calls for parental control and state censorship. *The Guardian* reported that governments in the Arab World censor Internet content beyond political dissent, based on morality and religious concerns. The blocked websites in MENA "range from pornography to politics." In Saudi Arabia, "citizens are encouraged to actively report 'immoral' sites for blocking, with hundreds of requests made every week" (Black, 2009, para. 3). In Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria,

public campaigns were launched to bring the governments to block *almawaqe' alibahiya* (porn sites) between 2012-2015. Censorship and limiting youth access to media content seems to be an approach that not only governments entertain but also some conservative segments of the society within the region.

Many countries (including Jordan, Sudan, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and others) filter Internet content (Shishkina & Issaev, 2018) that is assumed risky to the traditions and morality of the society or destabilizing to the security and national unity of the country, such as oppositional, radical, or jihadi radicalizing content. Oman uses the pretext of upholding the "traditional social values" as an important consideration for filtering web content (Shishkina & Issaev, 2018).

It is increasingly more obvious to Arab governments and societies that the overall national and transnational narratives, largely controlled and circulated by failing postcolonial Arab states is over. The practice of controlling news, views, and expressions through censorship and persecution is becoming costlier to the regimes. The power afforded by the Internet was realized by Arab states in the aftermath of the Arab Spring as the Internet enabled wide dissemination of oppositional views and perspectives, facilitating mobilization and organization of political movements, and making it close to impossible to take informational control for granted.

After decades of almost entire media control, Arab governments' concerns rose as the Internet demonstrated "a contested site of competing discourses, facilitate[ing] voices of both conservative elements supporting the status quo as well as groups seeking to change it" (Warf & Vincent, 2007, p. 91). With the increase in access to Internet content, Arab governments "have developed a wide range of techniques for maintaining their control. State responses have ranged from technical ones, designed to limit or shape access to the Internet, to selective repression and overt intervention in online communication flows" (Lynch, 2011, p. 305). Increasingly, many Arab states are using electronic armies, botnets, and other means of control in launching propaganda war and smear campaigns against oppositional figures and groups.

While governments in the region seem to want to maintain the status quo through censorship and restrictions to media, a continuation of the traditional 'virtuous' society mediated through state-monitored media (Momani, 2015) or family restricted access -- youth are getting more fluent in using and accessing media content and platforms. It is time for parents,

religious leaders, and policymakers to realize that their longstanding strategies of censorship, propaganda, and media manipulation are becoming costly and counterproductive. If policymakers do not take the initiative in introducing critical media literacy curricula in schools and universities, youth will increasingly be more subject to manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization by outside forces (as evidenced by ISIS). Youth are increasingly dependent on media for the development of their senses of self, using content that is manipulated by commercial and political biases. ISIS, in particular, reached youth through the utilization of widely popular grievances among the Arab population to attract them through the Internet (Dubber, 2015).

Youth are also exposed to content controlled by the algorithmic engineering of giant media networks that will not necessarily adequately inform or serve their interests. In a media-saturated world, with highly immersive media and communication technologies, "[critical] media literacy is arguably more important than ever" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 370). Hence, "a traditionalist 'protectionist' approach [which] would attempt to 'inoculate' young people against the effects of media addiction and manipulation by cultivating a taste for book literacy, high culture, and the values of truth and beauty, and by denigrating all forms of media and computer culture" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 372) will not be adequate to tackle an increasingly disorganized, globalized, and culturally fragmented media scene.

A proactive approach to media literacy

The protective approach to digital media and youth is both limited and limiting to digital media position and power – both for to youth and the future of the Middle eastern Societies. Digital media is reshaping global values and communities as they "have fragmented, connected, converged, diversified, homogenized, flattened, broadened, and reshaped the world. These changes have been reframing the way people think and restructuring societies at local and global levels" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 59). Despite all of the changes media bring to users, youth in the region are pressured to align themselves with long-standing tribal and sectarian identities (Yamani, 2010), traditions, values, and structures that are patronizing and seem incompatible with many of their newly created global identities and ideals, largely through exposure to global media content and networks.

This exposure and its impact on the social and personal formation of youth identity requires empowering youth to be able to utilize a variety of aspects and values to their growth and mobilities. Critical media literacy is instrumental in increasing students' respect and understanding of cultural differences (Luke, 1997). Luke (1997) argues that it is imperative for education to "engage constructively with media, popular and youth culture to better understand how these discourses structure childhood, adolescence, and students' knowledge" (p. 45). Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015) also conclude that media literacy education and curricular development should "actively involve young people in the curriculum rather than employ a 'top-down' or overly dogmatic approach" (p. 183). It is essential that policymakers in the Middle East recognize digital media power, rediscover its worth for social and cultural change, and reconsider their traditional strategies of propaganda and censorship. They need to start thinking about young people as partners in the making of the future of their own countries.

Critical media literacy for autonomy and social good

Critical media literacy positions the learner at the center of the literacy process, rendering him or her as an active participant in a continuous long-term process of learning and personal growth. The role of the learner requires that critical media literacy be taught in an interactive and engaging manner, preferably utilizing participatory approaches and collaborative projects (Kellner & Share, 2005). It entails treating learners as active interpreters of media texts with the critical ability to think of alternative, oppositional, or resisting interpretations of media messages. This includes dissociating themselves from the message and relating the message to its creators and considering their potential biases that are socially and culturally contextualized. Critical media literacy is built on a great deal of self and social awareness necessary to advance the individual's "critical autonomy" of the learner (Masterman, 1985; Kellner & Share, 2005). This awareness is cultivated using an emancipatory and open approach to media as a source of opportunities and risks and as a means of learning through active engagement and guided discussions. These discussions should extend beyond value judgement to include raising questions and inciting inquiry that would uncover and deconstruct the political and social underpinnings of these messages, platforms, networks, and technologies.

This type of critical media literacy requires the introduction of curricula suitable for adolescents and university students in MENA that aims at cultivating a new set of skills beyond the typical reading, writing, accessing, interpreting, and producing media content. The majority of the young people taught at the American University of Sharjah would come to the first day of media literacy class with modest awareness of the commercial and political drives of media messages; they also show little regard to the value of their own time as a "commodity" for advertisers and publishers (Potter, 2013). Because they are preoccupied with entertainment value, media viewing was only seen as a time passing activity with no considerable cost or consequence.

Kellner and Share (2005) encourage teachers to attend to media messages with young learners and share readings, prompt questions, and make interpretations "with an emphasis on eliciting student views, producing a variety of interpretations of media texts, and teaching basic principles of hermeneutics and criticism" (p. 373). Alvermann et al. (1999) advocate the cultivation of a sense of "agency" in the learner "in deciding what textual positions they will assume or resist as they interact [with media] in complex social and cultural contexts" (p. 2). This position is ideally navigated using a sense of self-awareness or "personal locus" as Potter (2014, p. 5) puts it. Personal locus informs the choices made by the learner and their interpretations, usage, and reproduction of information and media messages -- helping users construct a worldview that is empowered by both the media (at large) and their own critical literacy. Since this worldview is guided by their goals, it maximizes users' gains (Potter, 2010).

Primarily, critical media literacy has an empowering effect on young people as it "gives individuals power over their culture and thus enables people to create their meanings and identities and to shape and transform the material and social conditions of their culture and society" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 381). Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015) show how critical media lesson have enabled teenagers to address the potentials and setbacks of stereotypical, racial, and ethnic media portrayals. They conclude that "media literacy efforts with young people can indeed help to address prejudice and racial bias and promote an appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism" (p. 183).

Similarly, Marc Lynch praised Egyptian youth in Tahrir Square in 2011 for being "confident", "wired" and for "embodying this vision of new competencies aggregating into political change. By becoming producers of information and circumventing the

editorial control of state censors and mass media outlets, these individuals will become new kinds of citizens" (Lynch, 2011, p. 307). This group of Arab youth is largely made of middle class educated youth with great access to the internet. They largely enjoy media "fluency" that enabled them to access, use, produce, and publish digital content. Yet, there is no evidence of similar skills and competencies among different segments of youth, especially with digital divides among classes and in urban/rural areas in different Arab countries.

CONCLUSION

Research on critical media literacy in the region shows "low critical media literacy rates and little awareness of online media threats among Arab youth" (Melki, 2015, p. 27). This is despite the growth of media power over the public and widespread media consumption by Arabic youth. As media is increasingly playing a major role in providing social, political, and cultural learning for Arab youngsters, educators need to expand their networks and self/social awareness. In the Arab context, teaching critical media literacy has more potential when it is localized, participatory, and engaging.

Considering the limitations on the effectiveness of media censorship in the Internet age, a proactive approach to media seems to be inevitable for Arab governments and societies. This requires shifting the focus from controlling media usage and consumption to introducing critical media literacy education, both formally and informally. The promotion of, adoption of, and investment in critical media literacy can enable youth in the region to further their learning and engagement, maximize their personal and societal gains, and resist extreme ideologies. Overall, critical media literacy is a necessity in the new media ecosystem.

As Herrera (2009) argues:

youth in the Muslim Middle East are struggling to exert their youthfulness in the present and prepare for life transitions in the future in a context of ubiquitous neoliberal reforms, authoritarian regimes, and ongoing regional conflicts with no resolution in sight. (p. 368)

This majority suffers from a lack of quality educational resources, forcing them to live on the margins of their societies and life at large.

Critical media literacy is associated with learning, reinforcing, and correcting cultural and social codes and norms. Any curricular or pedagogical approach to tackle

issues of bias, racism, and sexism has to consider not only the negative role played by the media but also its potential in raising sensitivities, awareness, and questions towards these stereotypical portrayals and depictions. It is important that policymakers and civil society engage in deep conversations over how to mobilize national, pan-Arab, and global resources to take advantage of the Internet, youth media engagement and strong connectivity in many countries. Capitalizing on the common understanding of modern standard Arabic by millions of people in the region, any developed online initiative or sources can be utilized regardless of geography, maximizing rewards. Important educational sources can be found in Arab popular culture, shared by a variety of youth, since both Egyptian and Syrian dialects are widely understood in the region.

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