Critical Thinking, Down to a T

Noor Baalbaki

In summer 2013, the American University of Beirut held its inaugural Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB). It was the climax of multiple research projects, brainstorming sessions, conferences and workshops over the previous five years. The academy was based on a study-abroad model used by the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change and rooted in the curricular tradition of critical media literacy, which was first used in Europe in the 1950s, and subsequently adopted in the US and more recently across the globe. In the first class, 50 students and academics from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Jordan took part, and this year, it has expanded to include participants from even more Arab countries.

In this interview, Dr. Jad Melki, Director of the Media Studies Program and Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at the American University of Beirut speaks about the importance of digital and media literacy for the Arab region.

Noor Baalbaki (NB): Could you describe the work of your centre? What are the key issues you address during the two-week summer workshop?

Jad Melki (JM): When this field of study emerged, it was prompted by the introduction of television and electronic mass media in general, and the fear that media might affect us in many, and especially negative ways, shaping our world views and influencing our actions and beliefs. Media literacy was basically a response to this concern, fuelled by a sense of duty for academics who have to build critical thinking skills for people who consume this media. In other words, building critical media consumers who can understand how media messages are constructed, how entertainment is constructed; to understand what the political, economic, technological and social influences on these constructions are, and how they influence us as individuals, communities and societies. The Academy started teaching various topics, including propaganda, the negative effects of advertisements, the relationship between media and business, and other locally relevant topics that evolved over time. Especially with the role of the internet today and digital technology and mobile telephony, the focus became both critical media and digital literacy. We are not only teaching the critical reading of media texts but also how to use digital tools that are freely and widely available to express opinions, advocate beliefs, exchange information, and engage in global discussion and participatory culture— in other words, to empower individuals and communities. We encourage MDLAB participants to take these curricula to their hometown universities

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and teach them to their own students. So this is the main goal and mission of the academy. We are now introducing more advanced lectures, and some previously enrolled students will return to give lectures next summer so that we build local capacity and not rely on too many foreign lecturers and speakers. However, we will continue to invite world renowned media educators who will participate and give lectures at the Academy.

NB: So what are the core topics you are covering?

JM: As introductory topics, we cover: What is media literacy? And the different approaches to it; Where does the education stand globally?; The state of media in the Arab world; Culture and the influence of media and its impact on society. Then we move on to more advanced subjects, such as: The portrayal of Muslims and Arabs in the media; The objectification of Women in the media; Propaganda, how to analyze it, and how to protect yourself from it, whether its news, entertainment or even comics; Factors that influence the construction of news; The dark side of the internet: Surveillance and privacy threats that people should be aware of; Video games, children and violence; Media, sectarianism and racism. On the digital skills level, we teach students how to edit photos — from a critical thinking perspective — so they learn not only theoretically about the power of images and how these images are manipulated, but also experience hands-on how images are constructed. Similarly, students learn to produce audio, edit and put it online, how to analyze twitter and social media data, and finally some video editing skills.

NB: What role does 'critical thinking' play in your work? With students coming from different countries and different educational and socio-political backgrounds: How strongly do you perceive the differences in their approach?

JM: Having students come from different countries and different educational and socio-political backgrounds with different approaches is always a challenge. However, we anticipated that and it was not that much of a hindrance this year. It did not disrupt the Academy at all, although we had a few incidents. Frankly, in our societies, we have rampant sexism, racism and sectarianism and every other 'ism' in the world, and if people are not faced with these issues and their taken for granted beliefs are not challenged, they will still live their lives without realizing what is right and what is wrong. Although we are not here to change people's minds or views, or force them to subscribe to one ideology or another, we do tell them what is out there and how this harms people. We give them some tools to think critically through certain matters that are largely invisible to them. For example, I was discussing with one of my students an article written by this very progressive journalist at Al Akhbar newspaper. In his article the journalist was defending a female news director, but he was defending her by also praising the way she looked and dressed and flattering her physical attributes. However, when it came to the male news editor he was also defending, he only focused on his intellectual abilities, experience and patriotism. In many ways people don't see that as sexism, but it is, because the negative message we are thereby sending out to adult women, and children who will become adult women in the future is: 'A women's most important attribute — no matter how professional, intelligent, accomplished, and successful she is — is her physical appearance, and, if you are a woman, you need to take care of that first and not to worry about anything else.' When we raise our kids like that, and when the media reflect that, and portray women in that fashion all the time, then this is how women's minds and concerns are focused in our society. When it comes to men, it is different: The media focuses on

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their accomplishments, intelligence, smartness, etc. — who cares about their looks? So the student was telling me that this guy, one of the more progressive journalists in the country, sadly does not realise what he is doing with this kind of sexist description. That's from a critical thinking point of view.

Going back to the topic of different backgrounds, cultures and religions, our biggest problem was that of the different levels people were academically. Some participants had a quite high level of critical thinking and digital skills, others barely had any. We put them in the same room and for the advanced ones, it was a bit frustrating because we started with the basics. While for those who had no prior education, they felt bad and had to struggle to catch up. In one of the exercises, for example, which was about students critiquing advertisements — focusing on body image and how women are portrayed — a guy who had never been exposed to this topic before, came up with almost zero critical thinking skills! He looked at a picture of a women dressed provocatively and positioned submissively, surrounded by dominant men looking down at her and with this huge lion and its mouth open and its teeth right by her neck. The student did not see that the woman was in a vulnerable position. I think he even described it as being a normal or natural portrayal of a woman. It was then that many participants critiqued him, so he was kind of embarrassed, especially since he was one of the older graduate students who should know these basic matters, but this is indicative of how badly media literacy and critical thinking are needed in this part of the world.

The other issue is blunt racism and sectarianism; some people thought they were better than others because of their religion, the community they belong to, their culture or institution so we immediately dealt with such disturbing behaviour. This year, we instituted multiple activities and exercise that immediately nipped this problem in the bud and the outcome was fabulous.

We also introduced this year a more rigorous application process. Last year they only had to submit a CV. This year, they had to submit an essay, then we interviewed them, and based on the interview we prioritized them. We asked them a question: If you were in a room where people had radically different opinions and beliefs about something how would you deal with it? And based on their answers we would assess how open minded they were. We had a ranking scale, the optimal people were those who had their own opinions but were willing and eager to listen to other people's opinions. We got a lot of people scoring in the middle range, saying they won't fight with others who differ, but they might argue, but certainly not change their minds. Especially with many male Arab applicants, it seemed like something that had to do with pride, and the belief that someone who changes his mind or belief is a fool.

NB: It seems especially in the Arab world, a number of traditional media outlets — newspapers and TV stations — are not there for investigative, informative journalism but rather to convey ready-made messages. Is there any movement in this sector? To what extent do you see interesting new publications coming? And how do they deal with the issue of dependence/independence of funding?

JM: Arab media historically have been controlled by governments or political groups. In Lebanon it's political groups, in the Arab countries it's mainly the autocratic governments or their lackeys, and to a large extent they still are but under a different guise, even after the so called 'Arab Spring'. Al Jazeera, for example, owned by Qatar, was a model of objective journalism for a long time, and it had great production and news quality. This was up until the 'Arab Spring' when it shifted to a typical propaganda machine.

The online media have not been much different from the traditional media. The current situation is that the majority of online media are reflections of the traditional media and tend to be owned by the same political groups. Of course, there are some emerging online media run by independent journalists and bloggers who are adding more independent voices, different dialogues and opinions, but it is only a very small group, they only have a niche following, and have not reached a critical mass and effective level. Another trend in traditional mass media and specifically in Lebanon is the commercialisation of the news, which has introduced sensationalised news to attract more audiences, and more advertising, and hence more revenues. This is equally problematic as government controlled media.

This brings us to the subject of rumours. Rumours are a big problem in this part of the world given this uncritical media literacy environment, and I am not only talking about journalists generating rumours, but also rumours generated by the general public. Rumours take a life of their own and sometimes become facts for many. While many believe them, unfortunately, very few dispute them. For example, hate speech or racism, the racist rhetoric targeting Syrians in Lebanon and the sectarian hate speech between extremist Sunni and Shiite groups. Now social media makes it much easier to disseminate rumours — when the general public is doing it, that is one thing, but it's problematic when journalists do it, because the journalists have an obligation towards their audiences and often have an aura of credibility. Usually it's not propaganda with vicious intent, or misleading information as in psychological warfare — it is sometimes just inaccuracy, incompetence, or running for the scoop without double checking. When someone gives you information, the rule of thumb is to have three independent sources confirm it, if you can't get a third source then you can't post it or you can shed some doubt on it by saying you can't verify it independently, and then you would attribute it to somebody.

There are mistakes that happen in the news but people don't read the corrections which sometimes come the next day in newspapers. Finally, the 'breaking news' fad in Lebanon has become a big problem. Here, sometimes even dictation mistakes make a big difference in the meaning, especially in Arabic. An example of that would be the Arsal and Bir Hassan breaking news story a few months back on one of the Lebanese television channels where a single dot made all the difference: basically, the Lebanese know that Arsal is a predominantly Sunni town while Bir Hassan is predominantly Shiite. The alert read 'Arsal residents invade (yaghzoun) Alsalha residents in Bir Hassan', whereas it should have been 'Arsal residents offered their condolences (yo'azoun) to Alsalha residents in Bir Hassan'. In an environment fanning the flames of a purported Sunnite-Shiite conflict, this dictation mistake could have triggered civil strife in Lebanon. Now, there is a big difference between saying that a predominantly Sunni town is invading a predominantly Shiite community — particularly using the word 'yaghzoun' which evokes images of historic Arab tribal invasions — and saying that the former is offering condolences to the latter, although dictation-wise the difference is one tiny dot on top of a letter: غ instead of ع.