IOM IRAQ

GUIDELINES FOR PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY IN IRAQ

Provided by Media in
Cooperation and Transition

INTRODUCTION

The topic of Media Literacy has become an increasingly integrated component of capacity building for youth and for increasing resilience of communities. "Capacity building" of media has traditionally been conceived as supporting journalists, editors and other media professionals. However, the power to produce media today –or rather, any form of communication, particularly in digital forms –is in everyone's reach, thus anyone with a smartphone, tablet or computer can jump directly into public debate. Every citizen has the potential to be a "media producer," and capacity building activities must acknowledge this increasingly democratic and heterogenous landscape.

Media literacy is one such entry point for building media capacity among citizens. In Iraq, this topic has been important for humanitarian and development actors. In 2017, Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT) conducted a study to examine the level of media literacy among Iraqi media consumers. The outcome of this study showed that basic media literacy skills, such as comparing sources and understanding political parallelism (when parties or other political groups control media outlets and use them as mouthpieces), were prevalent among those surveyed. Specifically, over 70 per cent of respondents reported using two or more sources to find information on domestic political issues, and 60 per cent reported that they view sources from different political camps to discuss events with friends in family.[1]

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and MiCT recognize various blind spots in media and digital literacy remain, in particular for young people. As media has become a regular weapon of governments, non-state armed groups and so many other actors, citizens who cannot independently navigate their media environments are vulnerable to manipulation, radicalization and oppression. Furthermore, as anyone can potentially break today's viral story, the chances of an individual unwittingly disseminating false, misleading or dubious content are high. Media literacy has become just as important for citizens as editorial guidelines and codes of ethics are for media professionals. As Iraq continues to grapple with major changes within the country, a more peaceful and resilient society is one that can consume and produce media thoughtfully and responsibly.

The following three sections describe some of the most important media literacy topics to be discussed in Iraq, accompanying examples and exercises.

Figure 1: Food for Social Cohesion - various football teams in Tel Afar city came together to form a new team, with a mixed ethnoreligious backgrounds, to play in a tournament. IOM Iraq / Sarah Jader

I. MEDIA INDUSTRIES AND OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES

Iraq has managed to maintain a pluralistic media landscape throughout the different phases of transition in the past years. Media pluralism has outlasted government interventions, ongoing violence, religious extremism and fragile statehood. However, the level of political parallelism is extremely high. The vast majority of media channels are operated, financed or owned by political or other interest groups. The party system is thus deeply intertwined with the media system. Only a few independent non-partisan channels can be found on the internet and among some radio stations including those supported by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Discussing ownership of media is a good entry point to media literacy because people commonly recognize media's political affiliations. Such discussions prepare participants to identify sociopolitical power on the topics they are familiar with in relation to media production and consumption.

1. Political parallelism in Iraq:

Media literacy requires sound knowledge about ownership structures and the flow of money between parties and media in any context. The following guiding questions and exercises should offer opportunities for participants to reflect on assumptions that are implicit in media choices, and how styles and tones of certain media can reflect interests and power.

Guiding questions

- Who is running, operating and supporting media outlets in Iraq?
- What do we know about ownership structures?
- Are audiences in line with the partisanship of media? Do audiences cross the lines? (Which party or parties do you support, and what news channel or channels do these parties support or control?)
- How did partisan media affect armed conflict in Iraq during different phases of the post Baathis-era? Could you always believe certain channels and not others? Why?

Exercises

- Working group: Split participants into groups and let them gather information on ownership and financing of Iraqi media outlets. Compare the findings and discuss.
- Roleplay: let the participants take over the role of Saad al Bazzaz and Karbouli – both powerful media owners in Iraq with a political agenda and proprietary media channels. Let them explain why they run TV stations and what they try to achieve.
- Quiz: Show media content to the participants and make a quiz about the sources: what channels/sources was content taken from? Can you guess the source?

2. Independent media:

Independent media are considered a crucial segment in democratic media systems. From a normative perspective, they are conceptualized as a source of comprehensive and unbiased information for the electorate, as well as a site for political debate. Yet, due to economic and political conditions, independent media are rare in Iraq.

Guiding questions

- What is an independent media? Independent from what?
- How can independent media maintain revenues? What business models work in Iraq?
- Can you name an example of independent media in Iraq?
- How are independent media different from party media?
- Why is independent media important for a democratic society?

3. Public Service Media:

The Iraqi Media Network (IMN) was established by the American administration Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2004 as Public Service Provider. The flagship channel al-Iraqiya is one of the two most-watched TV stations in Iraq, competing with private al-Sharqiya. Despite its public service mandate, the IMN is used by the government as a mouthpiece to promote political and personal interests. In this section, we discuss the role of public service media in a democratic society and we assess the history and performance of al-Iraqiya and other PSM in Iraq.

Guiding questions

- What is a public service mandate?
- Why are public-service media important for a democratic society?
- How was the IMN established? What mistakes were made in its establishment (mandate, institutional structure)?
- How do we assess the performance of the IMN/al-Iraqiya against this obligation?
- How could this performance be improved?

Exercise

- Read CPA Order 66 and discuss whether and how these stipulations suit the Iraqi situation.
- Simulation game: let the participants develop a plan for the introduction of a public service broadcaster in 2004: who should be in charge? What process and what steps are required for the establishment? What stakeholders should be involved?

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1. Wollenberg, Anja and Anke Fiedler. "Critical Thinking Meets Selective Exposure: An Examination of the media literacy of Iraqi media users." 2017

4. Social media in Iraq:

According to Internet World Stats, the number of internet users in Iraq has grown from 7.1 per cent in 2012 to 48.3 per cent in 2018 (National Statistics, 2018). Social media today are tools for civic movements, organization of mass protests, and the connection of people across the country. As it did in Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia during the Arab Spring, social media enables citizens to circulate information despite restrictions at the government, party, or outlet level--restrictions that would have otherwise stifled democratic expression of public dissatisfaction. While social media contributed to expressions of individuals, ethno-sectarian racism largely migrated from mainstream broadcast media to social media. For example, platforms such as Facebook and Telegram have become hosts of racist and extremist communication, escaping authorities and detection for years.[2,3,4,5] Even videos posted on platforms such as TikTok – a popular platform among youth – have been traced back to pro-ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) accounts. The example provided in the footnoted source reports that eerily cheerful graphics (e.g. hearts and smiley faces) rain down from the top of the screen in a video featuring corpses being dragged through the streets.[6]

Guiding questions

- What is the main purpose of use among Iraqis for social media?
- How much trust do people have in social media?
- How do you see the problem of racism and hate speech in social media?
- How is social media changing politics in Iraq?
- Do you see social media as giving more support to people who need a voice or providing space for those who want to promote violence?
- How is blogging related to the above question? Do you see blogging as a positive development in political communication or communication in general?

Exercise:

Break the participants into groups. Together write down platforms of social media and what type of content is generally popular at each platform. Discuss which platform has hate speech /racism / discrimination the most and which platform has the least. Discuss which platform provides the most reliable information and which platform provides the least reliable information. Discuss in the large group why some platforms have more discriminatory expressions etc and some other platforms have less.

5. Media Accountability Instruments (MAI):

MAI can be described as any non-state means of making media more responsible toward the public. This includes instruments of media self-regulation such as press/media councils, ethic codes ombudsmen and other transparency initiatives by newsrooms online and offline. Through MAI, the profession tries to cut back on rampant partisanship and maintain quality control.

Guiding questions

- What initiatives, what instruments, what institutions exist in Iraq to enhance media accountability? How do we assess the achievements of these instruments?
- How do people discuss the quality of media content both on- and offline? Is this having any impact on media production?
- What is the main problem for MAIs to take roots in Iraq?

Exercise

Working Groups: Let working groups discuss (1) the Hate Speech Monitoring by Masarat and IMH, and come up with suggestions on how these efforts could be exploited more efficiently to counter hate speech and racism in Iraq; (2) Code of Conduct by the CMC and the Syndicate, and how the implementation of the Codes could be fostered (3) any new MAI that would help counter partisanship and racism in Iraqi Media.

Resources

Media Ownership Monitor by Reporter without Borders
http://www.Mom-rsf.org

Hat Speech Dictionary by the Iraqi Media House
http://www.imh-org.com

Al-Rawi, A. K. (2012). Media practice in Iraq. New York: Palgrave.

Awad, A. & Eaton, T. (2013). The media of Iraq ten years on. The problems, the progress, the prospects. (Briefing No. 8). Available from http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_media_iraq_ten_years_on.pdf

Al-Kaisy, A. (2019). A fragmented landscape: barriers to independent media in Iraq. LSE Middle East Centre Report. Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Wollenberg, Anja & El-Richani, Sarah (2017): In Defense of the Iraqi Media – Between Fueling Conflict and Healthy Pluralism. MICT Studies 2017 (1). Available from : https://mict-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/mediaandconflict_iraq.pdf

Isakhan, B. (2009). Manufacturing consent in Iraq: interference in the post-Saddam media sector. International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies, 3(1), 7–25. doi: 10.1386/ijcis.3.1.7_1

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2. https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/report-supporters-continue-evade-facebook-detection
3. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/05/05/2018/facebook-accused-introducing-extremists-one-another-suggested/
4. https://minerva.defense.gov/Owl-In-the-Olive-Tree/Owl_View/Article/1859857/telegram-and-online-addiction-to-terrorist-propaganda/
5. https://www.wsj.com/articles/telegram-app-tackles-islamic-state-online-propaganda11574789617-
6. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology50138740-

II. MEDIA PERCEPTION

Media consumers do not passively receive the messages of media producers. Instead, media users actively make sense from information provided by mass media. In this process of "sense-making," the political attitudes, history, education and numerous other characteristics of a person affect the perception of media content. Familiarize the participants with basic concepts of media use and media perception such as:

1. Uses and gratification:

Every use of media is linked to a purpose. Understanding media effects requires an understanding of the intentions, needs and expectations of users. In media literacy, people learn to reflect on our own intentions and examine what kind of media use is best suited to fulfil our needs in regard to a specific purpose.

Guiding questions

- What different purposes can drive media use and selection of sources?
- What kind of sources match with what kind of needs?
- How do needs impact perception and evaluation of sources?

Exercises

Give an assignment to working groups, who will reflect on very different purposes: one group is an individual who seeks migration to Europe and gathers information on how to cross the Mediterranean and about life in Europe; another group is a journalist writing a journalistic piece on the advance of the Haftar forces in Libya; another group is an Iraqi family in Baghdad consuming everyday news ; another person is in the hospital with a broken leg trying to kill time, etc. Let the working groups prepare a media plan and describe the sources they will engage in their media consumption diet. Let them explain their choices and deliberations.

2. Selective exposure:

Media users tend to select sources in accordance with their political attitudes and beliefs. Consequently, these beliefs are more often confirmed than challenged. In this section, we familiarize the participants with the concept of selective exposure and how it is related to media literacy.

Guiding questions

- Why do we select sources in accordance with beliefs and attitudes? Keywords: avoidance of complexity, confidence, capacity to act.

- What problems are implied in selective exposure? Keywords: echo chamber, societal fragmentation.
- How can we consciously reflect and overcome selective exposure? Keywords: understanding media structures and ownership, political parallelism, comprehensive and pluralistic selection.
- How is selective exposure related to the concept of media literacy?

Exercises

- Discuss personal experiences with selective and comprehensive exposure – do you seek for confirmation of your own beliefs? how do you deal with challenging information? How does challenging information affect your capacity to act confidently?
- Expose participants to challenging versus confirming information and discuss these experiences
- Expose the participants to different headlines on the same subject and let them choose: which one would I choose to read/watch and why?

3. Trust and credibility:

In addition to uses and gratification, trust is the main factor that determines the media's effects on people. The level of trust that people have in media varies across cultures and across socioeconomic classes. Trust in media depends on many factors: journalistic quality of media content, media structures and media pluralism, availability of alternative sources, education, history of media development, etc... In this section we familiarize with the concept of trust and how trust is affecting the use of information.

Guiding questions

- What factors shape trust in media?
- How is trust shaping the perception of media content and selection of sources?
- Why is trust in media important for a democratic society?
- How is trust related to the concept of media literacy?
- How can trust be restored by journalists and media?

Exercises

- Discuss how the legacy of the Baath-regime and the propagandistic use of media during the Baath regime is affecting trust in media today.

- Discuss how the current media structures in Iraq (political parallelism) is affecting trust in media.

- Discuss how trust in media might differ between socioeconomic classes, ethno-sectarian communities and generations in the Iraqi society.

- Discuss statistical data available about trust in media in Iraq; try to find explanations for differences in trust levels.

- Visit media outlets and discuss trust with editors and journalists working in the studios.

- Develop an interview guideline and conduct interviews with average citizens on the streets or in cafés about their trust in media. What are the reasons that make people trust/distrust in media?

4. Hostile Media Perception (HMP):

Individuals with strong political beliefs tend to view media content as being hostile to their viewpoint. Partisan media users will perceive media coverage as more biased against their beliefs than non-partisan media users would do. The stronger the polarization, the stronger the HMP effect, regardless of the coverage – which may or may not be biased.

Exercise

- Discuss which groups in Iraq are particularly affected by HMP. Why?

- Group the participants with different beliefs and let them watch the same report. Each group explains to the other group how they perceived partisanship of that report. Discuss the differences in perception and evaluation.

Figure 2: Anti-government protests in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, on 1 November 2019. Eng. Bilal Izaddin / Shutterstock.com

III. STRATEGIES OF MANIPULATION

In transitional and crisis countries, media is often used by political parties to force their views into the public debate. In many cases, information and narratives are manipulated by media producers to strengthen their position. In this section, let's familiarize students/participants with different strategies of manipulation. Most of these strategies are related to biased selection of topics, speakers, aspects and terminology. The goal is to enable to (1) identify and decode manipulative storytelling in the consumption of information and (2) reflect strategies of manipulation they might apply themselves, deliberately or not, in the production of media content.

1. Biased selection of events and topics:

Media and journalists are gatekeepers. They decide what events are included in the news and what events will not be addressed. From an ethical viewpoint, these decisions are supposed to be guided by the notion of relevance. Yet, very often these decisions are guided by political considerations: certain events are excluded from the news because they do not match the political agenda of the owner or gatekeeper.

Guiding questions

- What are the journalistic criteria for selection of topics?
- How would you try to identify missing topics, or topics that should get more coverage?
- Why do certain channels not cover certain topics? What are the possible reasons for the omission?

Exercise

- Compare the selection of topics and topic order/length in news bulletins of different channels.
- Compare ICG weekly reports with news bulletin of Iraqi TV channels.
- Discuss counter measures such as monitoring or media criticism.
- Discuss how biased selection is perceived by the users and how biased selection affects trust in media.

2. Biased selection of sources:

Journalists and media producers make deliberate decisions about the selection of sources: people who talk on camera, testimonials, experts, politicians, citizens, etc. As with the selection of topics, these decisions are often guided by political considerations. Sources are selected because they belong to a certain political camp or they talk in line with the political agenda of the channel. Often, information is based on the comments of the political elites while the voice of victims or civil society representatives is overlooked.

Guiding questions

- What are the different roles of sources in a report? Why include sources?
- What are the journalistic criteria for source selection and how do these differ from political criteria?
- How to identify manipulated selection of sources?
- How to evaluate a statement by a source?

Exercise

- Watch a TV report and discuss (1) possible reasons for selection of speakers and (2) what other sources could have been useful to convey a comprehensive picture of the matter.
- Simulation game: two participants represent a certain channel with a specific political leaning, but the channel will not be disclosed to other participants. The two participants select sources for a certain topic/event and other participants guess what channel they are working for. This can be reiterated within the setting of working groups.

3. Hate Speech and Racism:

For many years, racist rhetoric flowing through Iraqi media has fueled ethno-sectarian tensions. Hate speech is not a regular feature of public debates but resonates with political tensions. Extremist groups use hate speech to deepen ethno-sectarian cleavages. Recognizing, monitoring and reflecting on hate speech and ethno-sectarian racism is an important element of media literacy, which would therefore contributes to promoting social cohesion and curbing the vicious cycle of instability.

Guiding questions

- How can hate speech and racism be defined?
- How can hate speech and racism be recognized?
- What are the effects of hate speech and racism?
- What are the counter activities organized by Iraqi NGOs?

Exercises

- Write a racist/discriminatory article (about an identity that they themselves hold); make it a competition among the participants – who is producing hate speech and racism?
- Compare different texts on the same topic regarding language and use of racist frames and terms.
- Discuss the personal experience with encountering hate speech.

Resources

Hate Speech Dictionary by the Iraqi media House

http://www.imh-org.com/ مدرسة-الإعلام-العراقي

Charlotte Elliott, Wallace Chuma, Yosra El Gendi, Davor Marko, Alisha Pate (2016) Hate Speech: Key concept paper, mecodem project.

http://www.mecodem.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Elliot-Chuma-ElGendi-Marko-Patel-2016_Hate-Speech.pdf

4. Fake News:

The spread of false information in social media and in the world of traditional or legacy media has become a major concern among analysts and journalists in Iraq. Fake news is used by conflict parties in Iraq to either demonize their political rivals or to disguise harm caused by their own people or allies. Sometimes fake news is deployed to stir unrest and to foster chaos ("Where Facebook's fake news has deadly consequences", 2019). During the public protests that started in October 2019, the government and military forces tried to play down the death toll and number of wounded by spreading fake news. The spokesman for Iraq's armed forces, General Abdul Kareem Khalaf, even publicly denied the obvious use of live fire and tear gas by security forces against protesters. Ability to identify and debunk fake news is an important element of media literacy.

Guiding questions

- Why do people in Iraq spread fake news? Who are the main players and for what purposes?
- How can fake news be identified?
- How can fake news be falsified and corrected?
- What initiatives and platforms exist for debunking false news in Iraq?
- What software tools and technologies are available?

Exercises

- Show reports to the participants and discuss the trustworthiness of the information.
- Split the participants in working groups and make finding and debunking fake news in news reporting a competition.
- Give three examples of fake news: misinformation, disinformation, and misinformation and identify which is which. Which actors are more likely to spread misinformation as opposed to disinformation? Where does misinformation come from?

Resources

Bellingcat
https://www.bellingcat.com/

Tech 4 Peace
https://www.f6s.com/tech4peace2

5. Manipulation of emotions by pictures and language:

Drastic pictures and language are used by conflict parties to provoke negative emotions among constituencies against antagonists. By instilling anger or fear, these parties try to mobilize "their people" against other groups. Some extremist groups have successfully used gruesome footage to spread fear. Reportedly, ISIL was able to conquer Mosul only because the group published gruesome videos just before the military campaign.[7] Understanding the manipulative power of pictures and emotional language will protect media against abuse. Images are also used to evoke positive feelings, but with the same goal. Videos circulated on TikTok by ISIL showed happy and proud men and women hold firearms and driving armoured vehicles, with upbeat chants in the background.

Guiding questions

- How are pictures different from the text?
- Why do pictures allow easier manipulation?
- What is "emotional language"?
- Under what circumstances is emotional language and pictures legitimate or useful?
- How does image and video editing technology jeopardize concepts of truth and fact?

Exercise

- One group of participants produce a highly manipulative piece of journalism about a case of violence including the use of pictures; another group produce a journalistic, unemotional factual piece about the same case. Discuss emotional effects in the group and whether they were compelled by either piece.

Figure 3: Following a water crisis in southern Iraq, hundreds of protestor take to the streets of Basra on 25 September 2018 to denounce the lack of public services. Sebastian Castelier / Shutterstock.com

7. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/11/2016/war-goes-viral/501125/

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the People of Japan