

Education, Government Action Needed to Boost Media Literacy in Arab Countries

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Key Takeaways

- Media literacy is falling behind in the Middle East and North Africa, meaning citizens are ill-equipped to identify misinformation and dismiss fake news, particularly online.
- Most Arab states lack clear media literacy policies, and there is little government support or funding for literacy efforts. Media literacy programmes implemented in schools as compulsory education can help tackle this issue in the long-term.
- According to a regional survey commissioned by Think, consumption of news from podcasts is expected to increase by more than double over the next year across the MENA region. Consumption of news via international newspaper publications is expected to grow by 50% over the same period.

The prevalence of misinformation online has heightened attention on media literacy, or society's ability to critically assess news and information. Media literacy's benefits for society are widespread; it can help an audience decipher truth from deception, thus making it less susceptible to harmful content. A media literate citizen is less likely to be misled by a fake news report, and thus less likely to share it with others. In the Middle East and North Africa, most states lack strategies to improve media literacy and combat fake news, even as social media use steadily rises throughout the region. Regional governments can help protect their citizens from disinformation by developing national media literacy policies that prioritise education and digital literacy.

Media literacy, if adopted and taught from early childhood, has been shown to increase young people's resilience to misinformation and misleading content. From a media policy perspective, government proposals typically fall into two categories. The first category focuses on the role of information providers, relying on them to censor content and better manage the algorithms that decide what users see on social media. The second focuses on the role of the audience; by improving media awareness, this policy approach encourages people to critically analyse content.

MENA region falling behind in media literacy

Governments and social media platforms have used short-term approaches to combat fake news, including the use of fact-checking and content verification tools. For example, Europe has seen a growth in fact-checking outlets – either linked to established news organisations or operated independently as part of a civil society entity or NGO. However, these approaches focus primarily on platform competency and do not have a long-term impact on media literacy.

Improving media literacy will help enable citizens to decipher between information and misinformation. Consumers cannot always rely on platforms to censor information appropriately; for example, after billionaire Elon Musk acquired Twitter last year, he fired the social media platform's media censors and ended several programs aimed at countering misinformation. While platforms like Twitter play an important role in combating misinformation, a media literate audience can often identify misinformation without having to rely on a platform's censors. This is especially important given the rise of hate speech and other harmful content across social media platforms.

Most Arab states lack official policies regarding media and information literacy despite acknowledging the issue of fake news and the dangers it poses. Studies have shown low media literacy levels in the MENA region, particularly amongst youth. A recent [study](#) from the American University of Beirut, which surveyed 2,554 young people across Jordan, Lebanon and the UAE, found participants were “digitally savvy and adept at using digital technologies but not necessarily media literate”. It also found that most of the participants “overwhelmingly trust online content” and disagree with the notion that the internet poses threats to privacy or helps individuals gain influence or political power.

Data collected in a consumer survey (below) commissioned by Think Research and Advisory suggests that people in North Africa and the Levant region expect a 30% increase in news consumption via Twitter in 2023. North Africa expects to see a 41.6% increase in news consumption via social media (Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok) in 2023, with an expected decline in consumption from Facebook. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries expect to see a 35.8% increase in news consumption via the same social media platforms in 2023. These trends suggest a fast-moving media environment that warrants making media literacy a key priority for the region.

Non-government initiatives to improve media literacy

Despite the lack of government action, there are several non-government initiatives in the MENA region focused on improving an audience's ability to analyse news and information in changing digital environments. One example is the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) program in Jordan and Palestine, where students are receiving media training in school. Another example is The Day, an e-learning platform that offers some free media literacy modules to educators in the Middle East. The Day's media literacy program is being used at regional educational institutions including GEMS Dubai American Academy, Robert College of Istanbul, and the Asamiah International School in Jordan.

However, these initiatives require government support and funding to thrive and have a long-term impact. Reports published by United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) have shown that implementing media literacy curriculum in schools, especially in primary and middle school, can help students critically analyse news coverage while combating hate speech and prejudice. The MENA region requires more institutional support and funding for media literacy education. The United Kingdom model offers one potential pathway; the country's Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport launched a Media Literacy Taskforce Fund to award grant funding to projects piloting new methods of providing media literacy techniques for citizens.

Social media highlights media literacy's importance

MENA's desire for more local and innovative media approaches will shape the region's media landscape this year. Younger generations appear to be driving changes in media consumption, with an increased interest in TikTok and platforms including Twitter and Facebook.

Based on the survey conducted by Think1, MENA audience's readership of local newspaper publications is expected to increase by 12.1% this year, with respondents in the Levant and North Africa expecting to double consumption of local news in the coming year. Innovative approaches to media content are being prioritised, with audiences showing more interest in consuming news from podcasts. Media consumption via podcasts is expected to increase by more than double over the next year across the MENA region.

Below is a table comparing survey responses from different parts of the region, in terms of trust toward news channels as well as consumption habits.

Levant and North Africa consumers	GCC consumers
<p>Trust: Tend to trust international news networks slightly more than local news or news on social media.</p>	<p>Trust: Tend to trust local news slightly more than international news or news on social media.</p>
<p>Media consumption habits: While current levels of news consumption via Twitter are not known, audiences expect to increase consumption on the platform by 30% over the next year.</p>	<p>Media consumption habits: GCC expects to see a 35.8% increase in news consumption via social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok) in 2023.</p>
<p>North Africa expects to see a 41.6% increase in consumption of news via social media (Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok), with a reported decline in consumption from Facebook.</p>	<p>They are expected to increase consumption of local news by an average of 12.1%.</p> <p>GCC audiences expect to increase consumption of international news by an average of 17.5%.</p>
<p>Consumption of media from podcasts is expected to increase by more than double over the next year across the MENA region.</p> <p>Significant growth – 50% - is also expected in consumption of news via international newspaper publications by next year.</p>	

Changing habits requires media literacy action

Results from Think's survey demonstrate that MENA countries risk falling further behind on media literacy as audiences begin to consume more news from social media platforms. By investing in programmes that boost media literacy and prioritise education from a young age, regional governments can ensure their citizens are better equipped to identify misinformation and disinformation. Media literacy can also benefit society more broadly by encouraging citizens to engage more critically with news and information. A more literate society is a more resilient society.

Based on a survey commissioned by Think Research and Advisory in the MENA* region over a sample of 1600 respondents** surveyed online in December 2022.

*Countries surveyed: Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco

**Sample audience representative of internet consuming population

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