Media Education and Cultural Transformations

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In a country notorious for recurrent civil strife, religious sectarianism, racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and a weak sense of citizenry and identity, what role can media education—or media literacy—play to bridge divides and transform cultures of contention, contradiction and exclusivity to cultures of universal humanism, communal harmony, and inclusive justice? Lebanese media continue to reproduce social and political divisions and the entrenched, corrupt confessional patriarchal system. Weak levels of media literacy among the public and lack of media education at schools and universities means that such troublesome media recreations of social ills go unchecked, unchallenged and often unseen. Media education has the potential to transform individuals and communities from passive docile consumers of divisive media content, to active and empowered producers, reinventors, and disruptors of media messages and processes, thereby becoming agents of cultural transformations.

Media education has much to offer Lebanon and the region, yet it remains in its infancy, struggling to find a footing in schools and universities, despite many advances in the past decade. But problems directly or indirectly related to low media literacy levels extend beyond the political sphere and may be linked to Lebanon's widespread consumerism and a growing materialist culture, obsessed with physical appearance, titles and status, and additionally complicated with a conflicted identity that strives for modernity—particularly a superficial interpretation of western modernity—yet clings onto contradictory traditional oppressive values. Add to that widespread discrimination against women and many minorities, who remain severely underrepresented in positions of power, especially in government and media industries, and face an oppressive regime of discriminatory laws, matched only by rampant sexually objectifying media stereotypes and a paradoxical culture of sexuality that conflates postmodern sexual body display with traditional expectations of heteronormativity. Not to mention the pandemic of digital addiction that has plagued youth and adults equally, but its adverse developmental effect—mental, physical and social—on children is yet to be reckoned.

Media education instills a sense of almost reflex-like criticality that compels students to ask analytical questions about a message's author, intentions, purposes, design, persuasion methods, creative techniques, targeted audiences, and the lifestyles and values represented. It empowers them to respond with voice, text, pictures, sound, video and data that are packaged persuasively and credibly, and channeled effectively. We know from students we have engaged in our research that media education develops a nuanced understanding of the media industry and a sophisticated understanding of media influence and processes. "The course changed my view about the world and my role in it" is a common statement by many students who have taken a course or workshop in media literacy, even years after they graduate. Henry Jenkins noted that media education helps foster a strong participatory culture, and accordingly helps youth become empowered and engaged citizens able to confidently create diverse cultural expressions. And that is only the tip of the iceberg. We seek a brand of media education that instigates real, deep and significant change in Lebanese and Arab societies. The time is ripe for advancing media literacy education in Lebanese schools and universities. We urgently need a shift in education that offers a pedagogy of liberation and cultural change.

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