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International Approaches to Research on the Information Environment

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00

Introduction

Samantha Lai

Scholars around the world approach research on the information environment differently as a result of significant divergences in countries' media systems, political environments, and cultures. How can researchers and policymakers who conduct work on a global level incorporate these differences into their work?

In May 2023, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace raised these questions at a symposium on state media, held in collaboration with Meta. The symposium brought together an international group of experts to explore differences in how state media operates and is governed across countries. This compendium collects contributions from workshop participants across the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, who offer a range of perspectives on how researchers, civil society organizations, and governmental bodies govern and research media and its relationship to the information environment.

In the following, Aboubakr Jamai and Sadibou Marong provide insights on how authoritarian repression and political instability in the Middle East and the Sahel respectively threaten both production of and access to information. Ana Bizberge and Guillermo Mastrini outline the difficulties Latin American governments face in ensuring the viability of local news outlets, as social media companies' dominance grows in their region. Bouziane Zaid writes on the influence of cultural factors on people's information consumption habits in the United Arab Emirates, while Rodrigo Gómez uses the example of Mexico to emphasize the need for understanding countries not just on a national but on a subnational level.

This compendium offers under-considered perspectives on how the information environment is studied and viewed, with the goal of helping decisionmakers understand how existing efforts can become more globally applicable.

01

The Authoritarian Playbook of Digital Repression: Diversifying Perspectives on Content Moderation

Aboubakr Jamai

In the Global North, debates over content moderation focus on hate speech and fake news. However, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, researchers are often more concerned about combating authoritarian repression and protecting freedom of expression. These governance problems are not just limited to the online space, as restrictions to freedom of speech are also an offline reality.

When people living in democracies are dissatisfied with the information they receive through social media, they can turn to outlets such as television or radio. However, in the MENA region, social media is the only available option. In Morocco, the political opposition and advocates of democracy and human rights use platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to promote their views. Because of that, social media use remains widespread in the MENA region. In 2022, researchers listed five MENA countries among the top ten countries in the world for social media use.[1] These platforms play a significant role in shaping the information available locally.

Recognizing the significance of social media in their ecosystems, authoritarians have refined methods of digital repression. Some initially restricted citizen use of internet communication technologies, but had to stop as the financial costs were not sustainable.[2] Instead, they have deployed other methods of repression. Reporting on government-funded troll farms in Türkiye revealed that trolls would seek out oppositional content, harass the individuals

behind those accounts, and report those accounts in hopes of getting them suspended. Leveraged at scale, these tactics can damage individuals' reputations or restrict their freedom of speech.[3] Civil society and industry continue to fall behind in detecting these forms of manipulation, as there remains little research on troll farms in the region and their activities.

Better content moderation is necessary, but it can only have so much impact on the political realities of the MENA region. Freedom of speech is not just a social media problem; it is a political right that does not exist in the region. Over the years, the governments of Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, Türkiye, and more have developed new laws to criminalize speech on the internet.[4] The crudeness of authoritarian repression also means they have many ways to imprison opposing voices. Take for example the cases of Omar Radi and Soulamaine Raissouni, two prominent Moroccan journalists put in prison not under charges related to their work, but under charges of rape that human rights defenders have called repressive and unfair.[5]

Social media has powerful effects on the state of freedom of expression in the MENA region. Many citizens are reliant on it to access information, and authoritarian regimes have cracked down on these attempts through digital repression. But social media content moderation is only a fraction of the picture on freedom of expression in the MENA region. Without international legal and diplomatic mechanisms, freedom of speech and expression in the region will not change for the better. Global North stakeholders across policymakers and civil society need to be cognizant of factors beyond social media that affect the regional ecosystem.

02

In Times of War: Threats of Journalists' Safety in the Sahel

Sadibou Marong

Four Sahel countries have been rocked by military coups over the last few years. These changes had significant effects on the region, impacting the freedom and safety of journalists. Since the military seized power in these countries, their rankings in Reporters Without Borders's World Press Freedom Index have fallen significantly. Burkina Faso dropped twenty-eight places out of 180 countries between 2023 and 2024. .[6] Both Chad and Niger fell nineteen places from 2021 to 2022 and 2023 to 2024 respectively, while Mali's rankings fell twelve places between 2021 and 2022.[7]

In a bid to consolidate their power, military leaders have enforced a code of silence surrounding sensitive subjects. In Mali, the junta leader called on local journalists to adopt "patriotic" cover of the news.[8] In the words of Burkina Faso's coup leader, "We are at war, in war there is communication to be done. . . . We want people who will communicate, who will encourage the people to hold on."[9] The region's close ties with Russia have incentivized pushback against French influence, resulting in bans on international French media, the expulsion of foreign reporters, and a desire to silence criticism and push media to report in favor of juntas' narratives.[10] Ties with Russia and the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries have also contributed to the spread of disinformation through the ecosystem. In Mali, for example, the Wagner Group has launched numerous disinformation campaigns to advance its interests in the region, while threatening reprisal against reporters who write about it.[11] From northern Niger to northern Burkina Faso, community radios play an important role in the transmission of information. However, caught between the conflicting interests of armed groups and juntas, community radio stations and their staff put their safety and security at

risk to conduct their work. Many media outlets have been destroyed in territories controlled by armed groups and journalists have been kidnapped or killed, including Malian journalists Abdoul Aziz Djibrilla and Moussa M'Bana Dicko, in addition to French journalist Oliver Dubois.[12] Community radio stations are crucial to keeping local populations informed. That is why Reporters Without Borders, along with over five hundred West African community radio stations, has appealed to regional authorities and the international community to support and protect such outlets.[13]

In these times of war in the Sahel, press freedom is under threat, and journalists place themselves at risk to provide factual and reliable information. Researchers and policymakers in the Global North need to contextualize their work in these global realities, not just by studying the content and narratives produced within a region, but also by identifying how structural factors limit people's ability to produce or find reliable information.

03

Supporting Media Viability in Latin America: The Need for Localized Solutions

Guillermo Mastrini and Ana Bizberge

The entry of social media companies into the Latin American media market threatened the economic viability of traditional media outlets. In response, local governments drew from other countries' legislation to create social media regulation, though the impact of these policies was limited by their lack of international political leverage. To alleviate local criticism, technology companies developed programs to support local journalism.[14] However, these efforts have had limited impact. The situation in Latin America demonstrates that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to remedy social media's impacts on traditional media viability.

Prior to the entry of social media companies, the Latin American media system was not without its faults. For a long time, large media groups dominated the production and distribution markets at the national level.[15] They had close relationships with governments that, in exchange for outlets refraining from major criticism, did not interfere in their growth and economic development. Recent years have posed new challenges to media viability in the region.[16] Since 2010, the same extreme free market conditions that supported large local media players have supported the domination of new global internet players such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and Netflix. As a result, local media suffered significant drops in audience and income.[17]

Recognizing these challenges, Latin American governments have drawn from precedents set by other countries' legislations to create more competitive market conditions. The foundations for these new rules include the European Union's Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2018),[18] Copyright Directive (2019),[19] Digital Services Act (2022),[20] and Digital Markets

Act (2022),[21] and Australia's News Media Bargaining Code (2021).[22] Within Latin America, governments have put in place initiatives extending value-added tax to foreign digital service providers.[23] They have also increased regulation on video streaming services platforms, such as content quotas and financial obligations for platforms to support and promote national audiovisual productions.[24]

As in the Global North, some proposed legislations in Latin America have been criticized for jeopardizing human rights principles. One example of this was a 2021 bill proposed in the Mexican Senate by Senator Ricardo Monreal. The bill established a vague definition of "relevant" social networks (those with more than 1 million users) and required them to censor content such as "hate messages," "fake news," and content that could affect "order and public interest." The bill did not have clear guidance on how such terms are defined.[25] This was considered a mechanism of prior censorship by civil society organizations, as the government could have used this regulation to ban outlets it did not like.[26]

A key difference in the Latin American story, compared to that of the Global North, is an imbalance in power between governments and technology companies. Brazil's PL 2630 tried to establish obligations for internet intermediaries to address "systemic risks" posed by illegal content.[27] In response, both Google and Telegram invested in intense advertising and political lobbying campaigns against this initiative and were accused by local politicians of interfering in the country's democratic discourse.[28] As technology companies have disproportionately more resources and power, local politicians lack tools necessary to regulate or penalize them.

To alleviate local criticism, technology companies have created funds to support local journalism. However, investments so far have been inadequate to financially compensate for local news's loss in revenue. From 2018 to 2020, the Google News Initiative has supported projects by 1,190 media outlets in Latin America for a total of $26 million.[29] If, for example, Argentine media received 10 percent of that figure (the data regarding how much money has gone to each country is not currently available), that amount would be around $2.6 million in three years. That is less than 1 percent of the Argentine advertising market, or 0.01 percent of Google's advertising revenue in 2021.[30] Moreover, if local media companies are heavily financed by technology platforms, that compromises their ability to provide impartial reporting on these companies.

The entry of social media companies into the Latin American market has had detrimental effects to local media viability. Though local governments have tried to emulate the actions of their Global North counterparts, they lack the political leverage to make their efforts successful. Meanwhile, voluntary efforts from companies fall short on addressing the problem. Any solution developed, be it state aid or subsidies for public service or community media, will need to be customized to the region's needs and the resources available.

04

The Need for Audience Research: How Culture and Religion Shape Media Consumption Attitudes

Bouziane Zaid

Audience research is lacking in the MENA region. However, it is necessary because it helps researchers understand those living there by shedding light on cultural values and practices that inform public opinion toward social issues.[31]

Researchers often turn to news consumption patterns to understand a population's beliefs. However, consumption patterns of films and television can be just as illuminating. Netflix is an anomaly within the Gulf, as films and television shows hosted on the platform bypass domestic censorship of sensitive cultural issues.[32] While cultural imperialists may argue that the presence of American content regionally is a sign of cultural domination, evidence suggests that viewers in the Gulf have domesticated content on the platform to local cultural standards. Content produced in America often contains content that does not adhere to domestic perceptions of decency. So instead, viewers tend to seek out content from countries with more similar local contexts, such as shows from Egypt or Türkiye that include religious themes. Documenting these consumption patterns can help researchers understand local cultural values and map how cross-country value exchange occurs.

Audience research lets researchers identify information sources beyond the mainstream. In the Muslim world, a new generation of social media influencers—often Western-educated—have challenged traditional practices and teachings of religion, turning to online platforms to share their own relationships with religion and culture.[33] These trends require closer examination, as religion plays a defining role in many Muslim countries, and changes in how it is practiced are indicative of larger cultural shifts. Existing research has covered a limited number of influencers. As a next step, there needs to be more work exploring how these

social media influencers are reshaping the spiritual beliefs and religious practices of young people in the Gulf region. There is also the question of how online audiences interact with these influencers and how that affects perceptions of religious authorities in the long term.

When Global North researchers conduct comparative work, they should draw from the work of communications scholars based in local contexts. Culture and religion affect people's consumption habits and their opinions on social issues. This manifests not just in the news people consume, but also in their entertainment. Platforms such as Netflix and people such as social media influencers play no small part in shaping information flows within and across countries.

05

One Country, Many Faces: The Need for Mapping Media Subsystems

Rodrigo Gómez

In Latin America, scholarship on national media ecosystems disproportionately focuses on major cities, while neglecting demographic and contextual variances in surrounding areas. Work about Brazil primarily focuses on Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo; in Argentina, Buenos Aires; and in Mexico, Mexico City. However, it is imperative to consider these aspects not only at the national but also at the local level. Scholars need to more closely examine local media subsystems to properly define the broader national media and communication landscape.

Much is lost when scholars only study major cities within a country. Different groups within a country can still have different experiences with the information ecosystem around them. Take for example how differences in media systems and communication norms affect the way people process information in Mexico City compared to those in the state of Guerrero. Citizens who live in Mexico City enjoy a pluralistic media system, where they are exposed to a wide range of views. Most people own electronic devices and regularly access information online. In contrast, citizens in Guerrero rarely access information through technology-mediated means and rely more on interpersonal communication. Because of these differences, the same information can have different impacts on citizens from these two states. As citizens of Mexico City are accustomed to a pluralistic media system, they are more likely to have the media literacy skills to identify false information. Those in Guerrero, however, are likely to be more vulnerable to false information online because they are less familiar with online spaces and more likely to trust the information they see. By only basing research on major cities in a country, researchers risk neglecting these regional differences.

Approaches to accessing information differ across states, provinces, and cities, depending on unique socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of each region, such as the kinds of information demographic groups have access to, the traditions that shape how information is communicated, professional standards for journalistic behavior, and more. All these variables shape how groups within the same country process information differently.

Existing research frequently spotlights the media concentration of television, newspaper, and radio ownership in Latin America.[34] However, researchers must not neglect media subsystems and local media outlets. Across Latin America, numerous cultural and ethnic groups regularly listen to community radio stations, which are nonprofit media outlets that give them the cultural and linguistic representation lacking in mainstream media.[35] In rural communities, community radio fills the knowledge gaps left by commercial radio, the latter of which focuses more on news from urban areas or national economic issues that are not locally relevant. By studying the content featured in local media subsystems, researchers can better understand the concerns and culture of specific demographic groups and how they vary across the country.

A better understanding of regional media subsystems is necessary for researchers to study how people consume, use, and make sense of information around them. To achieve an accurate representation of a country's information ecosystem, researchers first need to build a map of local media systems and the characteristics of the people who use them.

06

Conclusion

Samantha Lai

This compendium makes a case that research on the information environment needs to be inclusive of diverse geographical needs. This can be achieved by accounting for differences in the threats faced by citizens and journalists, understanding the mechanisms available for governments to regulate industry actors, and studying people's attitudes and perceptions toward media.

As researchers and policymakers produce frameworks or policy solutions on a global scale, there are several lessons they can adopt. First, as policymakers develop policies and interventions, they need to understand what local needs are. In both authoritarian countries and countries facing political instability, restrictions to access of information span across social and traditional media and are shaped by offline restrictions to producing and disseminating information. Social media is only one channel through which authoritarian repression occurs, and the protection of journalists remains a priority.

Policymakers need to understand potential limitations in other countries' capacity when it comes to supporting the viability of their media systems following the rise of social media. While most policymakers in the United States and Western Europe have turned to regulation as a mechanism, it is not equally effective for governments around the world. Local policymakers and researchers will need to develop solutions catered to their countries' needs.

As researchers conduct cross-country comparisons of people's information consumption habits, they should draw from the expertise of local scholars to understand differences in cultural attitudes or in populations that live in subregions across countries. People are what makes an ecosystem unique. They vary, and so should approaches to understanding how they process information.

By piecing together all these approaches, researchers and policymakers can build a better understanding of how the information environment is studied around the world. This can in turn help form the basis of future comparisons and research agendas.

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The information environment is integral to democracy. This is the space where people process information to make sense of the world using tools from alphabets to artificial intelligence to produce outputs from the spoken word to virtual reality and whatever comes along in the future. Manipulation of the information environment threatens the legitimacy of democracy if citizens are increasingly unable to make free and informed decisions. Our understanding of this complex system is still emerging at the same time as conflicts within the information environment erode its integrity. In response, democracies around the world are increasing control over their national information ecosystems. But with little evidence to inform policymaking, they risk backsliding into authoritarianism or having their interventions backfire as trust in public institutions is degraded by information pollution. Carnegie's Information Environment Project is a multistakeholder effort to help policymakers understand the information environment, think through the impact of efforts to govern it, and identify promising interventions to foster democracy.

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