



Media
Education
Lab

Media Literacy in Kurdistan: A Five-Year Plan

Submitted to IREX and
U.S. Embassy in Baghdad

Yonty Friesem, Jackie Spinner,
Dlovan Baewari, and Arez
Hussen

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Media Literacy in Kurdistan: A Five-Year Plan



This report describes the collaboration of a team of Kurdish and U.S. academics and journalists envisioning the formation of a professional network to support implementing media literacy in Kurdistan. Between July and August 2024, the Media Education Lab conducted a site visit and participatory action research with faculty from seven universities across the Kurdistan region. Participants requested a shift from focusing on investigative journalism to support efforts and capacity building in media literacy across communities, ages, and professions. Data from site visits and interviews reveals a need for a shift in focus from a historical, political, and cultural perspective while offering four pillars of support to advance media literacy through three phases over five years. Future efforts should prioritize the building of a local network that is supported by regional Iraqi Kurdistan and international organizations to provide training, campaign, and lobbying for legislation to support media literacy practices, freedom of speech, and investigative journalism.

Executive Summary



Within five years, following a theory of change, we recommend the formation of a regional network based on the current interests of the university professors together with the Network of Iraqi Reporters for Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ). With support from the U.S. State Department and organizations such as IREX and the Media Education Lab, the newly formed network could organize:

Next Steps

- * A professional development training that media educators could then replicate and extend
- * Online social media campaign to raise awareness
- * Translation of educational materials
- * Implementation of media literacy courses across the K-16 educational system.

This project was funded by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad in collaboration with The International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). The governments of Iraq and the United States, through the Strategic Framework Agreement, are jointly committed to the establishment of affiliations between Iraqi and American academic institutions to promote and facilitate cooperation and coordination in the field of higher education and scientific research. In 2010, the Public Affairs Section (PAS) of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad launched the University Linkages Program.

Small grants like this give Iraqi universities the opportunity to strengthen institutional capacity in a variety of areas by providing funding for innovative ideas that help to develop new partnerships, foster sustainable collaboration in priority areas and expand the impact on Iraqi campuses while addressing needs within the local community. These small grants are also nimble enough to allow collaborators to identify key areas of mutual interest that can build from existing linkage activities and relationships and lead to longer-term engagement.

Therefore, the small grants are looking to:

- Provide funding for a diverse range of academic partnerships between U.S. and Iraqi higher education institutions and faculty members;
- Foster understanding and strengthen U.S.-Iraq relations through academic initiatives that promote capacity building inside Iraq, bolster long-term stability, and develop the next generation of Iraqi leaders;
- Strengthen the capacity of Iraqi universities to equip students for success in a local and global sphere.

As posted on the small grant application, U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and IREX expected a process that would:

- Establish a process of virtual communication, networking, and information sharing;
- Travel to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) for site visits, observations, and in-person project planning;
- Create a program proposal designed to build the overall capacity of IKR universities and colleges of journalism based on evidence from a needs assessment.

More specifically, the authors of this report identified the following objectives as goals for this report:

- Provide a contextual understanding of the state of media literacy in Kurdistan;
- Summarize the participatory action research of partner institutions in Kurdistan;
- Share key insights on opportunities and challenges;
- Offer a sustainable plan with recommendations to IREX for future initiatives that could be implemented with the support of the governments of U.S. and Iraq.

Historical Context

Media and Media Education in Iraq/Kurdistan

The media environment in Iraqi Kurdistan is highly politicized, reflecting the complex governing structure in the region and country. The two main parties are Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

The KDP was founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani, the father of current KDP leader Masoud Barzani, and it initially represented the broader Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq. The party's leadership was closely tied to Barzani's tribal base and centered in Erbil and Dohuk, in the northern part of Kurdistan. The PUK was founded by Jalal Talabani after a split within the KDP. Talabani broke away from the Barzani-dominated KDP after its failure to secure Kurdish autonomy during negotiations with the Iraqi government and following the collapse of the Kurdish resistance movement in the 1970s. The PUK, centered around Sulaimaniyah in the southern part of Iraqi Kurdistan, advocated for a socialist-inspired vision for Kurdish self-determination.

The historical relationship between the PUK and KDP is rooted in deep territorial and ideological disputes. These two major Kurdish political parties have dominated the Kurdish region's politics for decades, and their rivalry has shaped much of the modern history of Iraqi Kurdistan, including the media. Through these parties, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) oversees a range of media outlets, including television, radio, and newspapers. The most prominent outlets are linked to political parties. That has resulted in a fragmented media environment positioned along party lines.

In the KRG, journalists and media personnel have little choice but to align with the ruling parties, making it increasingly difficult and complex for independent outlets and journalists to operate.

KDP: Journalists working for KDP-affiliated outlets, such as Rudaw, Zagros TV, and K24 (Kurdistan 24), tend to reflect the party's political views and narratives. These outlets are influential in the regions controlled by the KDP (Erbil and Dohuk).

PUK: Journalists working for PUK-affiliated outlets like Kurdistan TV, Channel 8, and Kurdsat tend to present news in line with PUK perspectives, particularly in the PUK-dominated areas (Sulaimaniyah). These journalists often cover stories that align with the interests and policies of the PUK.

Because of pressure from political groups and even legal threats, independent journalists struggle to provide news reports within this politicized framework¹.

¹Reports from METRO for monitoring violations.

2023 Report: <https://www.metroo.org/english/dreja.aspx?=hewal&jmare=21067&Jor=1>

2022 Report: <https://www.metroo.org/english/dreja.aspx?=hewal&jmare=11921&Jor=1>

Historical Context

Media and Media Education in Iraq/Kurdistan

Independent journalists often face significant challenges, including political pressure, threats, harassment and even arrest for reporting critically on the KRG, corruption, or human rights abuses.

There is a smaller group of independent journalists who work for media outlets that attempt to remain neutral or critical of the main political parties. These include publications like Awêne, Shar Press, and Lvin, as well as some digital platforms. But for the most part, media outlets in the KRG do not offer what the West would consider neutral, independent reporting.

This is one of the reasons why working in the media is not considered desirable in Iraq. Low pay is another factor. It is not a career that young people seek. In fact, under Iraq and the KRG's educational system that places high school graduates in careers based on national test scores, the field of media and communication is near the bottom. Therefore, many students studying journalism or media in college are not there by choice. Those who do choose to work in the industry after graduation are often stymied by the hold that the political parties have on the media. Even if they are educated about ethics and objectivity, they cannot put these practices into place in the workforce.

For this reason, training aimed at teaching journalists in the KRG how to report objectively or to investigate corruption has been of limited value. It is likely the main reason why none of the journalism educators or journalists we encountered expressed any interest in more training of that kind. In fact, they very pointedly asked for help in addressing the rampant misinformation on social media, which is becoming an increasingly important platform for the younger generation.

The rise of social media has created a new wave of citizen journalists and activists in the KRG. These individuals often bypass traditional media channels to report on political corruption, economic struggles, and human rights issues through platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram. Indeed, the rise of citizen journalists and activists has been crucial in breaking stories that mainstream, party-affiliated media may not cover. At the present time, they also face the challenge of credibility and the risk of prosecution for their online activity.

To address these challenges, there is a need to develop a media literacy campaign designed to empower individuals with the skills to critically evaluate media and strengthen democratic engagement. Once that is achieved, training around investigative journalism could be more impactful. Ultimately, the quality of journalism from either mainstream news media or citizen journalists is measured by how it's received by the public.

Through site visits and interviews, we identified the following challenges:

1. Politicization of Media

The heavy influence of political parties on media outlets is a significant barrier. Because the PUK and KDP control most of the media, it is difficult for the public to access unbiased news or diverse viewpoints. This deepens political polarization and complicates efforts to critically assess media content, as much of the available information is seen through a partisan lens. In turn, it has contributed to low trust in media.

2. Censorship and Self-Censorship

Journalists and media outlets often face censorship or pressure to self-censor when covering sensitive issues such as corruption, human rights abuses, or criticisms of political elites. The fear of legal repercussions, harassment, or violence can lead to limited reporting on critical issues, affecting the public's ability to engage with a broad range of information.

3. Limited Access to Independent Media

Though there are independent media outlets, they often struggle with sustainability and face significant pressures. This restricts access to balanced and fact-checked information, making it harder for audiences to develop critical thinking skills when engaging with the news.

4. Educational Gaps

Media literacy is not widely integrated into the education system. Without formal education on how to critically consume and evaluate information, many people in the Kurdistan region lack the skills necessary to discern credible sources from misinformation or propaganda.

5. Social Media Misinformation

Social media platforms, while offering space for more diverse voices, are also a major source of misinformation and disinformation. Many users are not equipped with the critical skills to identify false or misleading information, leading to the rapid spread of rumors and conspiracy theories.

We believe that the media educators can help in two crucial ways: (1) through supporting reforms in education and (2) advancing efforts to combat disinformation. Through site visits and interviews, participants expressed the need for media literacy training and education. The broader issue of media literacy is aligned with U.S. State Department goals and is more impactful than training people to do better journalism when there are few outlets for that journalism. Instead, efforts can be focused on teaching people how to consume news. This can and should be led by journalism educators who are in a position in their university environments as media experts to lead discussions and implement change across programs and curricula.

Previous Interventions

NGO-led media training projects in the KRG have faced significant challenges and, in many cases, failed to deliver their intended outcomes. The complex relationship between media and politics was overlooked, and delivered without this context, resulting in training that was ill-suited to the local realities of journalistic practice. Many of these programs have focused on investigative reporting, ethics and digital reporting tools. They rarely provided long-term support or mentoring, reducing the impact.

The United National Development Programme (UNDP) has offered multiple training programs across media sectors in Iraq. One of its most recent was launched in December 2020. The UNDP Iraq's Citizen Journalism Project encourages and supports 120 young Iraqi journalists, bloggers, and social media activists from Iraq and the Kurdistan region. It was implemented in partnership with Tammuz Organization for Social Development and Sabaq Center for Media Development.

Generally, the programs have focused on equipping journalists with the skills necessary for investigative reporting and accountability journalism. It included workshops on data journalism, fact-checking, and sourcing reliable information. Participants learned how to investigate issues like corruption and human rights violations, fostering a more informed and responsible media landscape. Other UNDP trainings have focused on digital storytelling tools, including social media ethics, audience engagement. Multiple internationally funded efforts have also focused on journalistic training in the past decade, including ones from UNESCO, IREX through the U.S., French and Danish governments.

Team members Arez Hussen and Dlovan Barwari both have years of experience conducting trainings in the KRG and Iraq and identified the limitations of initiatives that don't take into account the reality of the newsroom structure or legal environment.

Despite significant investment in their training, many journalists returned to their previous roles. . Mr. Hussen highlighted the challenges faced by journalists and the media in Iraq, including the impact of syndicates, the lack of faith in these syndicates among journalists, and the poor quality of education. Mr. Hussen also discussed the trend towards prioritizing speed over quality in investigative journalism, which can lead to a lack of formal procedures, ethics, and incentives for producing high-quality investigative journalism.

International efforts to build a national network has been successful in countries such as the Philippines, Romania, Brazil, based on devoted individuals who used existing network to build on a coalition of partners and organizations. In the U.S. the case study of the Illinois Media Literacy Coalition, co-founded by Yonty Friesem and Michael A. Spikes can help promote a similar model in Kurdistan.

Participatory Action Research Methodology

University Site Visits and Interviews

ESTABLISHING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

IREX and the Media Education Lab conducted an introductory online meeting on July 17, 2024 with representatives from the 7 universities in the region to introduce the project and explain the scope of the initiative. We outlined the project and provided a rubric for the in-person assessment and follow-on virtual training. Importantly, we asked the faculty representatives to identify their needs and tell us what would be most useful regarding the scope of a project aimed at identifying key strengths and areas for growth in current training for IKR journalists. We also asked about areas of support that university faculty themselves might need in training aspiring journalists. The meeting was held in English with simultaneous Sorani interpretation.

UNIVERSITY SITE VISITS & INTERVIEWS

Between July 24 and 30, 2024, Professor Jackie Spinner of Columbia College Chicago, a former Washington Post Baghdad bureau chief, conducted interviews in seven universities across Kurdistan. With her were Dlovan Bawari, deputy executive director at the Network of Iraqi Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ) and Arez Hussen, an Iraqi activist and researcher with over 10 years of experience in the humanitarian, women's rights, and media sectors. Arez is the founding editor of the independent AUIS Voice at the American University of Iraq — Sulaimani. Both have master's degrees and are experienced working with both Western and Iraqi media. Each meeting with faculty and staff of journalism programs across the universities took between three to four hours. Information from these meetings were used to build a suitable program of professional development that was delivered online to participants.

THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT OF EDUCATION & TRAINING PROGRAMS

Participants worked at both universities and polytechnic schools, and the differences in academic context affected how our sources perceived their needs and the needs of their students. The two programs differ in teaching style, types of academic degrees offered, and level of oversight from the government. The universities tend to have a broader academic scope, and their academic programs are research-oriented. The curriculum is more theoretical. Examples of these types of schools include the University of Sulaimani and Salahaddin University-Erbil.

Polytechnic universities place more of an emphasis on vocational or technical education and are more likely to offer hands-on media training, as evidenced by student media. The curriculum emphasizes practical application and the content of coursework is overseen by the state. The polytechnic universities act as a unit, with a general curriculum approved by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Although individual professors can update their course syllabi, rules allow them to change only 20% of the agreed upon curriculum on individual level. More than that must receive approval from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research Committee. The latest curriculum was adopted by the government in 2019. Examples of these types of schools are Erbil Polytechnic University and Sulaimani Polytechnic University. In the following pages, we outline notes, insights, and information about the 7 site visits and the 16 key faculty contacts who provided information.

Salahaddin University-Erbill

Site visit notes: The Media Department changed more than half the curriculum in 2023 to balance the practical and theoretical classes and to adapt the curriculum with the technological changes and current style of journalism. They have a new system (Bologna Process)² that matches instructor feedback and teaching with hours engaged by the students.

As a part of the new curriculum, the department has included two new elective courses: "Safety of the Media Profession" and "Media Education/Media Literacy." Students are more interested in the media literacy class, with a ratio of 2:1 for every three students.

Dr. Hawzheen Omar first proposed a plan to teach media literacy in secondary and high school in 2021. It didn't get approved by the Ministry of Education but ultimately it would need to get implemented. He believes that this project could be a way to advance interest in his proposal. He doesn't want students to arrive to college without previous experience with media literacy.

Summary:

- Participants have a high level of awareness about the need for media literacy
- There is a collaborative and willing partner who is already offering a media literacy course and can identify additional places in the existing curriculum for it
- Participants have a clear understanding that this opportunity does not come with funding opportunities for computers or technical equipment
- Dr. Hawzheen Omar has the deepest understanding of media awareness of all the educators we met.

²APPRAIS Project. "Report on BP Implementation at Kurdish HEIs." APPRAIS, December 2022. Available at: https://www.appraisproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/APPRAIS_Report-on-BP-implementation-at-Kurdish-HEIs.pdf; abary, A., Abdullah, F., & Ismail, M. (2022). *Challenges in the Implementation of the Bologna Process: Focusing on Three Universities of Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. ResearchGate. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358223044_Challenges_in_the_Implementation_of_the_Bologna_Process_Focusing_on_Three_Universities_of_Kurdistan_Region_of_Iraq.

7/24/2024

Participants

Dr. Azad Abduaziz

Chair of the Media Department

Dr. Hawzheen Omar

Lecturer



Erbil Polytechnic University

Site visit notes: Participants represented the Media College and the Media Institute. They indicated to us that institutes are two-year professional schools, and the college offers four-year bachelor's degrees. They believe that faculty at the college would be the better partner.

Mr. Ibrahim Ismael has done research around social media misinformation and discussed the need for media literacy to address this problem across the whole of society, and not just in the educational environment. He and Dr. Zahir Sabir both noted that the public doesn't understand the principles of media. Lack of awareness of journalism standards is coupled with insufficient and ineffective rules and regulations, politicized journalism syndicates, and some deep gaps in faculty knowledge. These participants helped us identify the importance of addressing the needs of faculty first.

Summary:

- These participants have a high level of awareness about media literacy
- They recommend that a faculty development program needs to start with educators, as they themselves may lack media literacy competencies.



7/24/2024

Participants

Ibrahim S. Ismael

Lecturer and Head of the Media Institute

Dr. Zahir H. Sabir

Assistant Professor and Head of the Media College



Duhok Polytechnic University

Site visit notes: This was a difficult meeting. Participants had an expectation that we were coming with money. Instead of a participating in a conversation, they put us at the head of a classroom with faculty and students.

Participants indicated that a majority of teachers simply don't have experience or academic background in media. The incoming head of the college sees a big need to educate the teachers on how media work, and then media literacy could be emphasized.

They want a campaign for media literacy education in primary and secondary schools so that when students come to college, they have basic information that could be further developed in higher education.

Summary:

- These participants recommended a media literacy course that could be pushed into the general education requirements for students at all colleges.
- These participants had a low level of awareness about media literacy.
- They recommended using social media influencers to promote media literacy.
- These participants also identified the need for social media training for employees of news organizations.
- They pointed to potential entry points in the curriculum/courses as the following courses: Year 1 Semester 1 "Media Principles," Year 2 Semester 1 "Media Campaigns," Year 3 Semester 1 "Media Ethics," Year 3 Semester 2 "Media Law and Public Opinion."



7/25/2024

Participants

Dr. Fairooz Mustafa Hamdi

Lecturer and Head of the Media Techniques Department

Dr. Obaid Rashavay

Lecturer



University of Sulaimani

Site visit notes: This was the most productive site visit of all. These educators offer a media literacy course, and in fact, we found discarded notes from an exam on the floor of a classroom. They agreed to share the syllabus with us. Dr. Yohan Othman Hama (who is famous in Kurdistan for a children’s puppet program in the 1990s and early 2000s)³ also teaches media literacy in the School of Education’s Kindergarten Department. His course there is aimed at instructing future educators on how to teach media literacy in primary and elementary school. Another professor also teaches media literacy in the media department, Dr. Ibrahim Saeed, who we did not interview. They estimate that they have at least 10 professors who are able to teach media literacy.

The Director of the Media Department, Dr. Kawa Ezzadin Abdulrahman, indicated that the most recent update to the University’s media curriculum was completed recently, in 2023. They offer a media literacy course in the second semester of the first year that meets for three hours per week for 14 weeks. In the class, students analyze media news reports. Media literacy concepts are also pushed into courses in public opinion and media ethics. The educators suggested that media literacy could also be integrated into a “professional skills” course, which every student at the university takes at the beginning of the year. In this course, there is one week devoted to communication where a media literacy module could be placed. These faculty would like to see media literacy taught throughout the university, including the education school, and in primary schools. This could have “a big impact” on society, they explained.

Faculty identified that the main problem occurs post-graduation, when students seek employment in working newsrooms. No matter what you teach in the schools, they said, the political parties that own the media manipulate the journalists who work for them. Together we wondered: *Is this an area where a social media campaign aimed at the public could help?*

Summary:

- This is a well-coordinated and highly functional team of academics whose members have a strong understanding of media literacy and need for it and who teach media literacy in a variety of settings.
- Dr. Hama is planning a media literacy conference with a focus on primary/secondary schools.
- In Kurdistan, April 22 is Media Day. The university hosts events that explain how media works.

³Krmanj Zrar. (n.d.). [وێبگەرێکی بۆ ئارخایڤێکی جێگەرێکی]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cpwq2Qwka6U&ab_channel=KrmanjZrar

7/28/2024

Participants

Dr. Kawa Ezzadin Abdulrahman
Director of the Media Department

Dr. Yohan Othman Hama
Former Director, Professor since 2005
Directs the University’s Media and Culture Center



Sulaimani Polytechnic University

Site visit notes: There was a lot of discussion about why this grant funding is focused on media literacy and concerns that the US doesn't do enough to regulate social media (like Facebook) because the disinformation from the platforms based in the US causes problems in other parts of the world.

Many teachers were trained in Egypt. They have not conducted much research or given much thought about news media.

We provided a mini-training on media literacy and then facilitated a dialogue about its importance. After that there was buy-in from several of the prominent faculty who attended.

Summary:

- This group of faculty have very little understanding of media literacy, and their curriculum does not address it.
- In the context of a discussion, faculty could understand the need for it, but questions of curriculum implementation were not addressed.
- They suggested that media literacy could be integrated into the Kurdish Studies (Kurdology) course, to help students consider the relationship between media and culture.



7/28/2024

Participants

Dr. Sherko Jabar Muhamed
Director of Media Technology Department

Dr. Rebar Koran Mustafa
Assistant Professor

Four additional lecturers



Halabja University

Site visit notes: We observed that the dynamic of Halabja has a more Islamic nature with a particular mixture of openness and conservatism. This is reflected in the staffing and faculty of the University, too. While the city is run by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which has a secular philosophy, the staff and faculty of the University are mostly Islamic and support the Islamic political parties. Therefore, due to the unpaid salaries amongst civil servants in the KRI, which started in 2013, some staff and faculty of the university have boycotted teaching, especially among those who support the Islamic Parties as opposition to the ruling party.⁴ This has created a major challenge for the school because the number of hours students are taught is coupled with the demanding system of the Bologna Process, which is an international agreement to develop a coherent structure of program administration to ensure quality and comparability across countries. Mr. Farooq Jameel Kareem explained how the work stoppage affected students and faculty, noting that in a 14-week course, nine weeks were missed due to teachers' strike and two other weeks were public holidays.

As Head of the Media Department, Mr. Kareem explained that the department had a media literacy course, which he taught to freshmen students. Unfortunately, it was removed from the curriculum after being taught for one semester in 2021 because the department was asked to reduce the number of curriculum credits.

The mechanism for amending the curriculum involves a series of reviews and approvals, first within the department and then by the board of the Quality Assurance Department of the University. The course instructor has the authority to amend or modify the content of the class within the approved framework of the subject.

Summary:

- Faculty have a very good understanding of the importance for media literacy, but the curriculum has been recently reduced in credits, so a course taught in 2021 is no longer offered.
- The University has adopted the Bologna system but teaching boycotts have affected the quality of program implementation. In the Spring semester of 2023, only 3 of 14 weeks were

⁴Menimy, Dana Taid. "KRG teachers strike over unpaid salaries, urges Iraq to pay." The New Arab, 3 Oct. 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/krq-teachers-strike-over-unpaid-salaries-urges-iraq-pay>.

7/29/2024

Participants

Farooq Jameel Kareem

Assistant Lecturer, head of the Media Department
in the College of Human Sciences



The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

Site visit notes: We did not meet with faculty at this university but got an orientation to the university from the Director of Communications.

Summary:

- The university does not currently offer a major in journalism, but students can minor in it.
- Students can get extra credit if they write and participate in the university newspaper and publications.
- Media literacy could be a proposed topic for the 2025 Sulaimani Forum, which is the biggest and longest running policy event in Iraq, typically held in April. This would bring significant public awareness to the topic and potentially engage a variety of stakeholders across the region.



7/30/2024

Participants

Halkawt Ghaleb

Director of Communications



Findings From the Field

The educators were not interested in anything other than discussions about media literacy and how they can, from a pedagogical perspective, integrate it into the curriculum. Most of them made the connection about how these efforts could extend beyond their journalism classroom into society.

The professors want to train each other, their students, and their colleagues at the universities. There is a general recognition that journalism students cannot be the sole target of curricular efforts. Several talked pointedly about building relationships with their peers who teach in departments of education to help train future teachers who will go into primary and secondary classrooms. They also want to talk with their peers who teach science and law because all students are media consumers. Such efforts are beyond the scope of the initial grant, but it makes sense to focus on consumers of information and to do that with the experts on producing information. Faculty understand that the need for informed and critical media consumers is bigger than journalism education and could have a significant positive impact on society.

Observations

1. Two universities teach already media literacy and have submitted syllabi for English translation.
2. Polytechnics had not considered media literacy because they are focused on technical training and not as much on broader theoretical scholarship. For this group, Professor Spinner and team explained media literacy and offered mini-trainings on this topic to build background knowledge.
3. Faculty do not need support in teaching journalism in higher education, but they are open to the idea of collaborating with Western educators to develop methods to integrate media literacy into existing coursework or develop standalone courses.
4. Faculty were unfamiliar with curriculum mapping or similar review processes within media departments, likely because there is no accreditation process in place. But university teams understood the potential value of the process and welcome an assessment.
5. Halabja universities are having to pivot or pull back on some of their curriculum due to Iranian Islamic influence. They are struggling with staffing due to financial constraints and this has a significant impact on program implementation and quality. University faculty may go months without getting paid. At some institutions, faculty may not show up for work; sometimes students will not show up. This has broadly impacted all universities.

Expressed Desires for the Future

Faculty recognize that media literacy education can begin in primary and secondary education but teachers there will need to buy-in to the importance of teaching media literacy. University faculty want to offer contacts with the Ministry of Education and a curriculum for K-12.

Universities want support developing classes and curriculum that will be vetted through the Ministry of Higher Education. Sulaymaniyah University wants to create a media literacy module during their week-long boot camp next academic year for all students to access.

Universities want a conference gathering that enables them to share best practices on curriculum. This should extend beyond journalism faculty to include institutional peers interested in the subject of media literacy. April 22nd is Kurdish Journalism Day – it could be a launch point for the next phase. AUIS wants to showcase media literacy work and make it the theme of their next annual [Forum](#).

Online Professional Development Program

After conducting the participatory research through site visits and interviews, it was clear that our plans for the August online professional development program would need to focus on media literacy rather than exclusively on journalism practices. The organizing team included the authors of this report: Dr. Friesem, Professor Spinner, Mr. Barwari, and Mr. Hussen. With the recognition of the challenges of the partisan nature of the IKR press and with the student body of each university, the professional development program focused on the most urgent need to give participating professors access to key resources and best practices of media literacy education. Some professors have already taught media literacy, but they also requested some guidance. To prepare for the program, we produced a Sorani translation of the five steps of fact-checking, which served as a bridge between journalism education and media literacy.

The design of the online professional development followed the model of the Media Education Lab's MediaEd Institute. In this active learning model, participants gain new knowledge from experts and are actively engaged in dialogue and discussion with their peers. They then create their own plan for implementing media literacy lessons. Those who complete a plan receive a certificate of participation. Over the course of three consecutive days from Saturday, August 17 to Monday, August 19, the team lead by Dr. Friesem delivered three 90-minute online sessions with the 16 faculty who we met in our site visits. The sessions included:

Introduction to Media Literacy: <https://youtu.be/GnVfNyhyEwk?si=8zRmE5V5zGUyWUI7>
Saturday, August 17th

During this session, Dr. Friesem introduced various definitions of media literacy as well as the reasons why media literacy matters today. Participants gained knowledge of the core concepts of media literacy and the critical questions that align with the core concepts.

The Role of the Educator: <https://youtu.be/cDXmj2Aw-EE?si=tCvtxJcur6wqJKS6>
Sunday, August 18th

During this session, Dr. Friesem modelled an analysis exercise using two examples of contemporary media as the participants practiced how to apply critical questions to the evaluation of media texts.

Future Protocol: <https://youtu.be/IFIBgezNJyc?si=k7OOLWExScXWIO1n>
Monday, August 19th

During this session, Dr. Friesem introduced the process of Future Protocol models a structured planning process that helps participants to design a lesson plan to implement media literacy in a particular context. Participants were asked to complete their own Future Protocol as an implementation plan of a unit of instruction in media literacy. The plans were sent to Mr. Barwari, and Mr. Hussen. Upon review of the plans, participants received a certificate of participation from the Media Education Lab.

Sustainability Plan: Four Pillars of Support

For media literacy education to have a societal impact on children, adolescents, and adults in Kurdistan, initiatives must be planned for sustainability. Based on evidence from our site visits, interviews, and professional development offerings, we base our future plans on the following four key pillars of support.

Pillar 1 | Local Support: The main way to ensure sustainability of a media literacy initiative is to activate local support that will provide continuous and contextual resources provided by the members of the community. This will require training, tools, and a mechanism to create a local network of people who are prepared to continue the work. Creating a local network has helped advance media literacy education in US states and in countries like Brazil, Bulgaria, Jordan, Palestine, and Romania, just to name a few. National or regional network organizations rely on media educators, journalists, and scholars who together create teaching materials, local conferences, professional development, and advocate to legislators and other thought leaders. We understand how cultural sensitivity and efficient communication are key to success, as we saw with Professor Spinner's experience using the Kurdish language to facilitate understanding. We see the value and impact of using the Kurdish language in training programs. Additionally, local support is crucial for understanding the specific context of the region. With the greater Kurdish diaspora and Kurdish descendants living outside of Kurdistan, they might not fully understand and experience the current complexity and nuanced context of Kurdish efforts in investigative journalism, media literacy legislation, and increased accountability of the media industry. A strong network takes years to build, but there is now a foundation for bringing more people together to establish sustainable local support.

Pillar 2 | Holistic Support: Systemic thinking about how to implement media literacy in Kurdish education is needed. In addition to the need for legislation to bring media literacy to primary grades and increase training programs for educators, there is a need for a systematic approach to help the larger community value the need for media literacy. A holistic approach can involve civil society, other professional organizations, and even government entities. Because the Ministry of Higher Education controls the curriculum, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Ministry of Education may also be an important ally for legislative changes and support.

Pillar 3 | Continued Support: The current dynamic in Kurdistan is suitable for advancing media literacy training and spreading the narratives of media literacy education in universities, schools, and society. After providing foundational skills, momentum must continue with support that includes materials, resources, case studies, and strategies for addressing current events. Participants expressed their wish for in-person support that would include access to additional experts and personalized coaching that involves members of the community.

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Pillar 4 | Societal Support: Societal support comes from members in the community, parents, opinion leaders, politicians, journalists, publicists, and the business community. How can all begin to see the value of media literacy and wish to advance its implementation in society? As we learned from the site visit and the online training, the focus of this initiative should shift to focus on media literacy education. With the KRG hoping to gain support for media literacy (despite their current lack of political power to influence curriculum), there is an opportunity for a societal change in the long run.

Challenges & Solutions: The four pillars of support have not been included in previous trainings due to some of the challenges we identify below.

1. The Challenge of Influence. The work of all universities is regulated under Law No. 8 of 2008 titled “Law of Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in KRI⁵. The current lack of funding for education and the limited power that professors have to control university curriculum are obstacles. However, there is some encouragement from the Kurdistan Regional Government that is hoping to advance media literacy. Although there is the potential for politics to hinder the implementation of media literacy education, this can be addressed by creating a sustainable national and regional network of education advocates.

2. The Challenge of Educational Hierarchies. Performance on test scores determine students’ admission to public universities in Iraq. Students with the highest scores get access to programs in medicine and engineering school. Media studies is amongst the lowest tier based on the scoring system and based on societal perceptions.⁶ For that reason, a holistic approach to media literacy to impact all students and society would help to advance critical thinking, freedom of speech, and investigative journalism practices in the form of media literacy initiatives on various system at the same time.

3. The Challenge of Politics in Media Practice: Many media professors have limited practical experience. In Kurdistan, working journalists don’t necessarily have journalism education and students who are trained in the universities go to work for partisan media and cannot apply their training of investigative journalism. With constant changes in the media industry, continued support and training that brings together professional journalists and educators would be beneficial to spread media literacy.

⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/OB3ZCxZq0AwksdjBYZENVZEplSms/view?resourcekey=0-7hGVnkOreWC5lLq8YLdXhQ>

⁶ Iraq Foundation. (n.d.). Iraq education. Iraq Foundation. Retrieved August 2, 2024, from <https://www.irfad.org/iraq-education/>.

Risk Analysis

We created a table to reflect our current understanding of the types of risk that any future initiatives will need to address.

#	Type of Risk	What If?	Likelihood	Impact
1	Programmatic/ Financial	The 2nd phase of the grant is not approved by the State Department	Medium	High
2	Political	There is a change of administration resulting from 2024 US election or changes in foreign policy	Medium	High
3	Political	There is an escalation of conflict in MENA that spills over to Iraq	Medium	High
4	Human Resources	The background of the staff of the project (ethnic, religious, political, workfield) is not diverse	Low	Medium
5	Programmatic	School boards lose interest in media literacy	Low	High
6	Political	Political parties intervene and block efforts to increase awareness on media literacy	Medium	High
7	Financial	Boycotts and teacher strikes continue due to unpaid salaries	High	Medium

Suggested Next Steps

With all the challenges facing Kurdish society (including the regional government, partisan media industry, and underfunded educational system), there is an opportunity for this initiative to grow its impact by: (a) strengthening institutional capacity; (b) developing new partnerships; (c) fostering sustainable collaboration; (d) expanding the impact by addressing local community's needs.

To achieve these goals, we developed a 5-year plan that includes three phases that build awareness, impact behavior, and engage in social change. In each of these time frames, we explain the impact of implementing the four pillars of support and the opportunities they would serve.

Increate Awareness (Years 1-2)

The first step toward any change is to create awareness. Combining the high engagement and interest of the university professors along with the Network of Iraqi Reporters for Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ), there is a solid foundation of participants who could be engaged to form a regional network. It can start simply as a WhatsApp group that is supported with regular meetings. By providing workshops and training in Erbil, media professionals and professors could develop curriculum resources and, in the process, form a new entity to advance media literacy by applying a train-the-trainers model. The group could work on the development of a social media campaign, deliver media literacy course across campuses, and being a liaison with professional newsrooms, among other things.

Pillar 1 | Local support for awareness | Starting with the universities

All the media departments in the seven universities have courses that could include media literacy, including Ethics and Law, Public Opinion, Media Campaigns, Public Relations, Media Principles, etc. The University of Sulaimani is currently teaching a media literacy course that can become the basis for a course for all the universities with the help of the experts at the Media Education Lab and NIRIJ. The department of Media at the University of Sulaimani is teaching media literacy in the School of Basic Education, Department of Kindergarten. Additionally, there is a general course in all polytechnic universities with ethics of media that can be helpful. When local university professors work together with local media professionals, this can begin to establish sustainable support that could eventually become a model for elementary and secondary education in Kurdistan.

Pillar 2 | Holistic support for awareness | Establishing the network

The foundations of the network of professional advocates and supporters of media literacy already exist among the current educators who have both academic and professional experience and the members of the NIRIJ. Using a WhatsApp group, participants can start brainstorming and meeting regularly to envision how this holistic support will look like. The network could be extended to include people affiliated with any of the social media content creation channels and formal K-12 education system. Future members could include representatives from more media entities, including the highly politicized ones in addition to educators from other higher education disciplines. The inclusive nature of a nonpartisan media education network will create exposure to a multiplicity of opinions that will provide a holistic perspective to support the needs of a variety of communities in Kurdistan.

Suggested Next Steps

Pillar 3 | Continue support for awareness | Train the trainers professional development

Educators at the universities are obliged to earn 70 points annually to get promoted, which is done through conducting seminars, participating in conferences, and maintaining a research agenda. The establishment of a network that focuses on media literacy throughout the campuses will allow for continuous support on current trends. It could also inspire the creation on localized materials to promote media literacy on campuses, not as a merely a subject matter but also as a pedagogy that could be applied across disciplines.

The Media Education Lab's model of the MediaEd Institute has successfully created a continuous support network in the US, Brazil, and other countries. Gradually, local trainees become the trainers to other local educators and professionals, creating a process that ensures continuation and sustainability by increasing capacity.

Pillar 4 | Societal support for awareness | Social media campaign

In order to bring societal awareness, many participants talked about the need for an online campaign via social media. It was suggested that a social media campaign be created, using Kurdish memes to promote media literacy. The campaign could be set to launch on Kurdish Media Day, April 22nd. The campaign would be the first interdisciplinary collaboration of the new network, and it could be the first effort to inform the public about the importance of media literacy. Additionally, it has been suggested to submit this report to both the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research regarding their partnership with universities.

Impact Behavior (Years 3-4)

The second step toward systemic change is to change people's behavior. After creating the foundations for a network, its members can start developing a training for teachers in K-16 across the educational system in Kurdistan. With increased implementations of media literacy across grades and disciplines, there will be a growing need for training and workshops, and the network will have increased capacity to provide this support. If the annual online public awareness campaign is accompanied with media coverage of successful case studies of effective implementation, more educators will be inspired to make behavioral change.

Pillar 1 | Local support for behavioral change | K-16 implementation plan

After a successful implementation of a media literacy course in higher education, this phase could focus on adapting it to the elementary and secondary education level. With the support of local advisors such as middle school and high school educators, university professors, NIRIJ, and other members of the now established network, five courses could be developed to target the developmental level of the learners:

- Kindergarten (5-6 year olds)
- 1st-2nd grade (7-8 year olds)
- 3rd-5th grade (9-11 year olds)
- 6th-8th grade (12-14 year olds)
- 9th-12th grade (15-18 year olds)

Suggested Next Steps

Significant effort will be needed to create resources that use local examples that are relevant and nuanced, and the network will provide professional development programs to offer training in the creation of materials as well as the pedagogy of media literacy. Outside organizations such as Media Education Lab could be utilized to support the local network in this work.

Pillar 2 | Holistic support for behavioral change | Legislation efforts

Implementing media literacy in the formal K-12 educational system can be challenging without support from school and community leaders. Members of the network will need to develop formal and informal relationships with the staff at the Ministry of Education to gain support for this initiative. Media educators, journalists, community leaders, and other stakeholders will be needed to push for this change. Support from the State Department or international community could also help raise the profile of the cause and its leaders. Workshops on legislation consultation, lobbying, and case studies of successful efforts will be important. The behavior change would be in the form of a suggested legislation to make media literacy a mandatory part of K-12 education.

Pillar 3 | Continue support for behavioral change | Opening the training to all

The professors and journalists who were participated in the Awareness phase will become the trainers and they will offer programs that are open to more educators who want to learn more about implementing media literacy pedagogy and how to use media literacy materials. This training can be extended to be even more localized to each city and university campus. If successful, these training programs will increase the number of local teachers and educators who participate.

Pillar 4 | Societal support for behavioral change | Proving press releases to media outlets

With “stories of success” in hand, the network can now work with its own members from the news and PR industry to release monthly press releases with case studies that describe the work of educators and journalists. More exposure to stories about how media literacy is integrated into education would help spread the word about importance of critical thinking when it comes to many forms of media. Exposure to examples of successful implementation would help move public opinion and legislators to hold more positive attitudes about media literacy as it is practiced at home, at school, and at work.

Create Sustainable Change (5 years and beyond)

The third and last step is toward a broad societal change. As the last stage of the change process, evidence exists where people can see the impact on the whole society. Now media literacy can move from the formal school system into informal lifelong learning. Community centers could include media literacy programs for senior citizens and adult learners. A collective effort by the networks and its allies will promote legislation that protects freedom of speech and investigative journalism as more and more people are practicing media literacy in daily life. The impact on Kurdish society can be enormous as there is more capacity and resiliency against misinformation and disinformation. Across the region, ages and profession, media literacy is acknowledged as an essential skill and practice for all.

Suggested Next Steps

Pillar 1 | Local support for societal change | Including adult learners

With a greater understanding of the need for media literacy skills for all, programs and local courses for adults in the community could be developed. This would help strengthen people's resilience in the face of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda.

Pillar 2 | Holistic support for societal change | Legislation on freedom of speech

In order to foster investigative journalism and freedom of speech, there is a need for a law that protects journalists from government prosecution. At this time, freedom of speech and investigative journalism is neither desirable nor encouraged. For example, a recent law about social media put a lot of restrictions on freedom of speech⁷. Indeed, most of the laws in Kurdistan were designed between 1975-1988, the period that includes the emergency of the Iraq and Iran wars. While it takes around six months to change a law if there is public will, funding can be a serious obstacle. But with growing evidence of behavioral change and the successful implementation of change in the education system in Kurdistan, the network can lobby for protections on freedom of speech and therefore investigative journalism. This will improve the international reputation and profile of the region and help to draw in more financial resources, too.

Pillar 3 | Continue support for societal change | Integration into teacher education

With the growth of the understanding of the importance of media literacy, integration of media literacy education courses across teacher education programs in universities will help to prepare pre-service teachers. The train the trainer model of professional development will be open to professionals and educators in all seven campuses in Kurdistan and provide not only a constant support but a place to come back and learn new trends and new materials developed.

Pillar 4 | Societal support for societal change | Participatory campaign

In the final stage of the program, we anticipate that the Kurdish public would endorse the practice of media literacy at home, at school, and at work. Social support should be maintained by developing various campaigns that feature people showcasing their support for media literacy practices, legislation, education, and freedom of speech. A participatory campaign or contest that invites community members to speak about media literacy would be desirable. Topics could include critical thinking, investigative journalism, fighting misinformation and disinformation, and recognizing the benefits and potential harms of artificial intelligence. This campaign can provide the needed support for protecting freedom of speech and strengthening the resiliency of the Kurdish people.

⁷ <https://presidency.gov.krd/krp/docs/PressLaw-KRI.pdf>

Conclusion

This report outlines the findings and recommendations from a site visit and participatory action research that was conducted by the Media Education Lab in Kurdistan between July and August 2024. The primary objective was to assess the needs and priorities of university faculty in the region and to develop a strategic plan for advancing investigative journalism and media literacy.

Key Findings

Shift in Focus: Participants expressed a strong desire to transition away from investigative journalism and toward media literacy initiatives.

Cultural and Historical Context: The analysis highlighted the historical, political, and cultural factors that have influenced media consumption and production in Kurdistan.

Four Pillars of Support: Based on the research, four key pillars were identified to support media literacy development in a five-year plan:

1. **Local Support:** Establishing a regional network to train and empower local educators for capacity building.
2. **Holistic Support:** Resource development across disciplines by translating and disseminating educational materials as well as inviting professionals to join the network.
3. **Continues Support:** Incorporating media literacy K-16 curricula and providing a training in various regions across Kurdistan.
4. **Societal Support:** Promoting media literacy through social media campaigns and lobbying for supportive legislation.

Recommendations

To achieve these goals, the report recommends a five-year plan centered around a theory of change. The plan proposes the creation of a regional network, in collaboration with the Network of Iraqi Reporters for Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ), to implement the following activities:

- **Professional Development:** Conducting train-the-trainer workshops to equip educators with the skills to teach media literacy.
- **Curriculum Integration:** Integrating media literacy into K-16 curricula with education ministries.
- **Social Media Campaigns:** Utilizing online platforms to raise awareness about media literacy.
- **Educational Materials:** Translating and adapting existing texts and resources for Kurdish context.

Funding Priorities

The report emphasizes the need for continued funding to support the implementation of these initiatives. Future funding should focus on:

- **Network Development:** Building and sustaining the regional network.
- **Advocacy Efforts:** Supporting lobbying efforts for legislation that promotes media literacy and freedom of speech.
- **Resource Development:** Creating and disseminating culturally relevant media literacy materials.

By following these recommendations and securing ongoing funding, Kurdish communities will become more critical consumers and producers of media as well as active citizens.

Our Team



**Yonty
Friesem**

Dr. Yonty Friesem is the Executive Director of the Media Education Lab and he supports a global community of media educators by providing an online space to explore new inclusive, interdisciplinary, and innovative pedagogies. Dr. Friesem's publications include the theory of inclusive dialogues including digital empathy, the evaluation of youth media impact, and digital and media literacy professional development. In 2022, Dr. Friesem co-founded the Illinois Media Literacy Coalition and co-edited the *Routledge Handbook of Media Education Futures Post-Pandemic*, a global survey of media education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, Dr. Friesem started a two-year tenure as the vice chair of the international steering committee as part of UNESCO Information and Media Literacy Alliance.

Jackie Spinner is a professor of journalism at Columbia College Chicago, where she oversees the photojournalism major and broadcast journalism program and is faculty advisor to the Columbia Chronicle. She was a staff writer for The Washington Post for 14 years and covered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She is the editor of *Gateway Journalism Review* and a regular contributor to *The Washington Post*. In 2010, started the award-winning AUI-S Voice, Iraq's first independent student newspaper at The American University of Iraq. She was a U.S. Fulbright Scholar in Oman and taught journalism at Sultan Qaboos University in 2010-2011, where she founded Al Mir'ah, the university's first independent student newspaper. She is an author (Scribner 2006) and filmmaker (2018, 2022).



**Jackie
Spinner**



**Dlovan
Barwari**

Dlovan Barwari is an Iraqi journalist and lawyer with over 20 years of experience in journalism and human rights advocacy, focusing primarily on investigative journalism. He earned a Master's degree in Constitutional Law, (Freedom of the journalism as a Human Right and its regulatory mechanisms in international covenants, particularly as they apply in Iraq). Currently, he serves as the Deputy Executive Director of the Iraqi Network for Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ), where he plays a pivotal role as a founding member. In this capacity, he oversees numerous investigative reports and provides specialized training in investigative journalism, as well as foundational training across various aspects of journalism, in collaboration with specialized organizations.

Arez Hussen is an Iraqi activist and researcher with over 10 years of experience in the humanitarian, women's rights, and media sectors. He holds two MA degrees in Gender, Violence, and Conflict, and Middle Eastern Studies. Currently, he oversees the Democracy and Human Rights Program at Norwegian People's Aid in Iraq and serves as Director of Middle East Operations at Global Medical (formerly Peace Possible) in Phoenix, USA. A former member of the UN Women's Gender Innovation Agora team, Hussen also was the Deputy Director of Asuda, local organization combating violence against women in Iraq.



**Arez
Hussen**



The Media Education Lab is an online community that advances the field of digital and media literacy education through leadership development, scholarship, and community engagement. The Media Education Lab was founded in 2003 by Professor Renee Hobbs to improve the educational practice of media literacy through educational programs, curriculum design, professional development and community outreach. The Media Education Lab also studies the best practices of media literacy education and conducts program evaluation to measure the impact of teaching media literacy using a multidisciplinary research agenda. Since the Media Education Lab is a community of learners, many educators, faculty, graduate students, and scholars join the network to increase their leadership skills and their ongoing capacity for innovation.

 www.MediaEducationLab.com

 +1.312.767.7628

 info@MediaEducationLab.com

 @MediEduLab

 7606 Harrison St. Forest Park, IL 60130