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Media And Information Literacy Will Help Prevent Violent Extremism

We also need news and religion literacy to combat today’s toxic environment.

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BRIANAJACKSON VIA GETTY IMAGES

“Democracy demands media literacy, and this particular moment in time demands a serious investment by newsrooms and by tech giants like Facebook and Google and investment in news literacy,” said CNN’s [Brian Stelter](#).

His comment was partly in reaction to the accumulation of invective by President Donald Trump who called the media the enemy of the American people and purveyor of fake news.

It was music to my ears hearing Stelter utter those words on his show “Reliable Sources” a week after I’d spoken on the

The event, "[Media and Information Literacy: Educational Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism](#)," was held at UN headquarters and grouped experts from across the globe.

It's part of UNAOC's and the United Nations Academic Impact's "Unlearning Intolerance" program, and, as with most such initiatives requires a heavy dose of critical thinking.

As noted Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung once said: "Thinking is difficult, that's why most people judge."

The following is a text of my presentation at the conference:

According to Lebanese sociologist Mona Fayyad, to study violence mechanisms consider ties between the environment and violent behavior, plus hereditary, biological, systemic, psychological elements, plus depression, character, and individual learning capacity, as well as political, social and cultural factors.

Lebanese journalist Hazem El Amin, an expert on violence, extremism, terrorism and radicalism [notes](#) that attraction to extremist movements frequently is the perception that they project power and control.

He says it's not all based on religion. Some deviants could be avenging battered mothers in domestic violence incidents, or just be unemployed people looking for jobs.

Women and girls are also drawn to extremist organizations. Some follow boyfriends, husbands, siblings or other family members. In most cases, it's under false pretense of a better, holier and more exciting life. To their horror, they discover it's all a hoax.

Religion isn't always the key attraction.

Sadly, children's and young people's behavior is often learned by imitating peers, adults, media, games and other sources. Tragically, they and adults fall into this gaping trap for various reasons.

Monkey see, monkey do.

The trailer of "[Love and War on the Rooftop](#)," a documentary on conflict resolution by the NGO [March Lebanon](#) takes us behind the scenes of a story of former street fighters and sworn enemies in poor Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods of Lebanon's northern port city of Tripoli who were turned into theater actors and friends.

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Policymakers, media, educators, civil society and ordinary citizens can turn information into knowledge and positive outcomes.

Fear of "the other" can be turned into curiosity about, respect for, and empathy towards "the other."

It takes work through learned behaviors. We have to make an effort to achieve those goals. Ignorance isn't bliss.

Policymakers, media, educators, civil society and ordinary citizens can turn information into knowledge and positive outcomes.

We can succumb to hatred like what's churned up by xenophobic French mayor [Robert Menard](#) whose fear mongering

against asylum seekers.

Ironically, Menard once headed *Reporters Sans Frontières* (Reporters Without Borders) and the *Doha Center for Media Freedom*.

We can publish scary pictures and headlines like this one from Newsweek.

We can fall victim to cognitive dissonance.

Or we can be inspired by those who offer positive solutions.

In Canada, the Alberta Teachers' Association put out this book: [Promoting Success With Arab Immigrant Students: Teacher Resources](#).

It can be adapted in other countries, contextualized and shared by, through, the media across multiple platforms.

[The Development for People and Nature Association](#) and [The Lebanese Organization of Studies and Training](#) produced "Better Together," a book on a project grouping Syrian and Palestinian refugees with their Lebanese peers (aged 15-25) who collaborated through acting, storytelling, drawing and singing to promote empathy, tolerance and understanding.

"Let's Coexist" is a [video](#) produced in 2016 that was prompted by political divisions and a destructive war in Yemen that have torn the country's social fabric.

It draws on what unites Yemenis: food, music, their favorite place in Yemen, and a desire for peace and stability. It sends a powerful message to their fellow citizens.

We should promote critical thinking. I try to deconstruct all media and information into journalism's basic questions: Who, What, Where, When, Why and How?

We can impart various skills to youngsters, adults, and the media in traditional or digital forms.

Enter the need for media and information literacy (MIL). It's crucial worldwide.

We also need news and religion literacy to combat today's toxic environment.

I've been trying to create [awareness](#) on the subject in the Middle East and North Africa region for decades.

In 1999, a colleague from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism and I designed a cross-cultural media project.

In 2007, I presented a paper for a UNESCO world literacy conference in Doha, Qatar entitled "[Media Literacy: A Tool to Combat Stereotypes and Promote Intercultural Understanding](#)."

These are just two of the many articles, chapters in books and blog posts I've published. I've written, spoken, and trained extensively on the subject.

Here are some recommendations to mitigate the spread of violent extremism via media and information literacy.

We need better engagement with stakeholders through:

- Media and information literacy
- Ethics in the news
- Cross-cultural and interreligious initiatives
- Buy-in from, and involvement of, the media
- Violence-free projects in schools
- Creation of useful apps and games for disaffected youth
- The use of social media to prevent violent extremism.

Remember: Media (plural of medium) are a double-edged sword.

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