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Diversity and pluralism in Arab media education curricula: an analytical study in light of UNESCO standards

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Prior research looking at Arab experiences in media education, despite its importance, did not provide a comprehensive evaluation of the curricula and study plans in Arab media colleges and departments but rather treated media education in a narrow and partial way. Therefore, this study fills this research gap by analysing the curricula of 21 media colleges, departments and institutes in 10 Arab countries from a perspective related to pressing issues of the Arab world, namely, the issues of diversity, pluralism, rights and freedoms. Three levels of content analysis were adopted to evaluate media education in the Middle East and North Africa—specifically, the learning objectives for managing diversity and differences based on UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Educators and Learners. The results showed that 33.2% (79 out of 238) of the total number of learning objectives in the UNESCO curriculum were specific to the skills of managing diversity. The study classified them into five main areas: promoting human rights, equality, pluralism, the culture of dialogue, and the commitment to ethics. Emphasis on adherence to media ethics was the most evident in all of the Arab academic plans, followed by, to a lesser extent, the emphasis on promoting the culture of dialogue, peace, and understanding, and finally promoting human rights. The weaknesses were represented in the lack of clarity on the items related to pluralism, democratic practice, equality, and the empowerment of women. The paper concludes with a discussion of the importance of adopting deeper methods of analysis to evaluate the items on enhancing diversity management in all Arab education curricula, in addition to the importance of establishing a practical discussion among decision-makers and experts to integrate new media education into the curricula of media students in line with advanced international experiences and take into account the notion of cultural privacy.

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Introduction

Most Arab countries are recorded in the lowest ranks of international reports that monitor civil liberties, pluralism, the guarantee of rights, social equality, and freedom of expression. For example, the fourth edition of the Global State of Democracy Report indicated that 11 Arab countries are among the worst for democracy, with five countries classified as a "hybrid regime" and only two Arab countries credited with a democratic regime (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2022). Most Arab countries (14 countries) were classified as "nonfree" by Freedom House's annual report (2022), and only five Arab countries were classified as "free".

Given the multitude of internal and external causes and factors that have contributed to perpetuating these conditions in the Arab region, media studies scholars have approached this topic from several perspectives: for example, they examined the influence of Arab media on cultural, social and religious diversity, freedom of expression and women's empowerment by monitoring the attitudes of elites, journalists and media professionals (Al jwaniat, 2021; Al-Bogami, 2020; Mansoor, 2010; Sedek, 2019, 2021) or the attitudes of public audiences (Kotb, 2020) or through content and discourse analysis (Ashi, 2019; El Wazzan, 2020; Hassonah, 2016). Studies have examined Arab media education curricula by shedding light on the attitudes of professors, students and journalists (Abdulgani, 2007; Talaat and Elsaied, 2020), by evaluating media education according to academic accreditation and distance education standards (Ali, 2021; Husain, 2008; Musa, 2016) or by comparing Arab media education curricula with non-Arab media education curricula (Alheezan, 2007).

Media literacy education (MLE) has reached advanced stages in many countries through different experiences and curricula. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) represents a global referent in this field (Alcolea-Díaz et al., 2020) through many contributions.

Media literacy refers to the skills and competencies that are required to be developed consciously and independently to suit the new communication environment of the information society, while "media education is a process, media literacy is the result of this process" (Pérez Tornero and Celot, 2007, p. 9). Accordingly, researchers and specialists are interested in determining the nature of the learning objectives and skills included in media education curricula. UNESCO has produced a long list of publications in this field, including the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Curriculum for Educators and Learners (Grizzle et al., 2021).

In the Middle East and North Africa, the establishment of journalism education institutions dates back to the 1930s in Egypt; then, educational programmes spread to other countries from the 1960s onwards. Until the mid-1970s, there were only 15 academic programmes in the Arab world that taught journalism and mass communication. In 1981, a UNESCO report indicated that there were 30 academic programmes in 17 Arab countries, which increased to 120 programmes in 2017 (Tweissi, 2018).

According to Melki (2011, 2013) a set of obstacles currently hinder Arab media education development, including resistance to change and adherence to the traditional curricula. "The application of programmes falling under the MIL umbrella varies from 'almost non-existent to relatively dynamic'" (Abu-Fadil et al., 2016, p. 13).

Despite their significance, research efforts on Arab media education experiences did not provide a comprehensive assessment of curricula and study plans in Arab media colleges and departments but rather addressed the topic narrowly and partially, such as evaluating a specific programme (Kirat, 2008) or

media departments of a specific country (Zaqzouq, 2021). They also examine graduate attitudes toward certain courses such as media ethics (Al-Mekkawi, 2018) or compare the curricula designed by the faculty at two universities (Hassan, 2018). Therefore, this article attempts to fill this gap by analysing the curricula of 21 media colleges, departments and institutes in ten Arab countries from a perspective related to pressing issues of the Arab world, namely, the issues of diversity, pluralism, rights and freedoms. Then, we answer the following main question: How have these issues been addressed as learning objectives in Arabic media education curricula?

This study is based on the recent UNESCO MIL curriculum (Grizzle et al., 2021) in evaluating the Arab media education curricula—specifically with regard to learning objectives related to managing diversity and differences through the following questions:

1. What is the proportion of the focus on diversity and pluralism in the UNESCO Media Literacy Curriculum compared to the total number of learning objectives?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Arab media education curricula with regard to diversity and pluralism management items?
3. What are the courses that develop the skills of managing diversity and pluralism in the Arab media education curricula?

Theoretical background

Learning objectives in the MIL. The objective of a course or programme is usually in the form of a specific statement regarding what the teacher intends to teach. "The aim of a module gives the broad purpose or general teaching intention of the module whilst the objective gives more specific information about what the teaching of the module hopes to achieve" (Kennedy, 2007, p. 22). Competency-based education divides learning into larger components of objectives called competencies. It covers a larger range of objectives that the learner is required to master to ensure their learning. It also precisely defines the basic skills required to perform a particular task. In the field of media literacy, the term "information competencies" is increasingly being used to refer to the new, approved educational models in order to determine the competencies that the student must possess upon completing their studies (Elharon, 2016, p. 73).

Hobbs (2010) defined digital and media literacy as a constellation of life skills including the ability to access information, analyse and evaluate messages, create content, reflect on one's own conduct and communication behaviour, and take social action as a member of a community. These competencies are not different from what was stipulated in the European Charter for Media Literacy, which referred to the competencies of using "media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions" and making "effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities" (Bachmair and Bazalgette, 2007, p. 84).

UNESCO has expanded the concept of media literacy education and not only linked it to the student educational environment but considered that media education enables members of society to reach an understanding of the media and acquire skills in using the media to communicate with others. It is part of every citizen's right in order to guarantee freedom of expression and the right to access information, in addition to the fact that it is indispensable for building a stable democracy. Thus, recommendations indicate that media education must be

included in the national study curricula whenever possible, in addition to other informal learning patterns. In 2011, UNESCO developed an MIL curriculum for teachers, which has been translated into 11 languages, and motivated researchers to consider how to integrate it into national education programmes in many countries (Gendina, 2016).

UNESCO proposed five laws for MIL, focused on multiple aspects linking media education to the management of diversity and difference, coexistence, and human rights. They consider that all forms of information providers are crucial for use in civic participation and sustainable development; MIL is intended for every man and woman within guaranteed human rights, all citizens who wish to obtain and understand new information or knowledge, or communicate—their rights must not be compromised or derogated (Singh et al., 2016, p. 35).

In general, MLE has become one of the basic requirements that are not only related to the skills of understanding media messages but has become a component of the comprehensive system of human rights, within the conditions for achieving sustainable development and civic participation for all people.

The UNESCO MIL curriculum (Grizzle et al., 2021) and its competencies framework target educators and learners in developed and developing countries by focusing on the required competencies and skills that can be integrated easily and conveniently into any educational system. The curriculum includes 19 competencies and learning outcomes, in addition to 6 social values/attitudes that can be encouraged through the consolidation of these competencies. The six values and directions are as follows:

- "Intercultural and interreligious dialogue
- Freedom of expression, information, and participation
- Tolerance and respect for others
- Awareness of self and the value of challenging one's own beliefs
- Understanding of international human rights standards
- Sustainable development, solidarity, and peace" (Grizzle et al., 2021, p. 19).

Media literacy education in the Arab world. Hawail and Abdul Jalil (2009) indicated that there was no specific activity related to media education before the Tunisia workshop organized by UNESCO in 2002, followed by the Cairo workshop, with the aim of introducing media and education workers to the principles of media education. One of the leading Arab countries in this field is Lebanon. Media literacy has been included in the Lebanese education curricula since 2005, within the seventh-grade curriculum (Yahya, 2007). In 2013, the Media Studies Programme at the American University of Beirut announced an initiative entitled the Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB), which aims to develop and promote digital and media education in the Arab regions through training professors, teachers, students, and university graduates, working on preparing curricula, case studies, and multimedia materials, and publishing them online in an open-source environment.

In 2015 some topics covered by the Academy's sessions and workshops were announced, such as media literacy and human rights, media literacy's role in the Arab region, news coverage of human rights violations, media portrayals of marginalized communities, media and religion, sectarian hate speech and free speech, and media and gender, sexuality, and body image (Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut, 2015).

The Forum of Media and Informatics Experts, held in Qatar in 2013, issued the "Doha Declaration for Supporting Media Education in the Middle East", which included a set of recommendations, including enabling young people of different cultures to interact through the media, combating stereotypes, and encouraging tolerance (Doha Centre for Media Freedom, 2013). The Jordan Media Institute (2016), in partnership with UNESCO, launched a project to introduce MIL in Jordan, with the aim of building national capacities in Jordanian educational institutions, transferring basic knowledge and skills in MIL to new generations, and spreading awareness and knowledge among decision-makers, opinion leaders, and society. The project focused on introducing media literacy concepts into educational curricula, training teachers on MIL skills, and transferring them to seventh, eighth, and ninth-graders in a number of schools in Jordan.

Other countries have adopted the integration of media literacy into other courses, such as Morocco, where an integrated unit for media education has been adopted in the Islamic education curriculum (Al-Samadi, 2008). The Moroccan experience has focused on how to integrate cinema into educational activities through organizing regional, local, and international festivals, considering cinema as one of the tools to express the culture of society, and there are many opportunities for children and young people to produce films (Allabban, 2015).

Cairo University, in collaboration with the Autonomous University of Barcelona and with the support of the UNESCO Office in Cairo, produced a kit aimed at making available resources for university professors to use in their teaching of MIL courses at different public and private institutions. The kit includes materials on intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, stereotyping, reconstructing stereotypes, freedom of expression, and press freedom in MENA countries (Tayie, 2016, p. 111). According to Tayie (2016), since the year 2000, MIL has been taught at all 18 public and 29 private universities in Egypt.

Among the logical foundations of MIL in the Arab countries, as Grizzle (2016, p. 28) indicated, we may list the following:

- Combatting stereotypes and promoting intercultural understanding;
- Promoting press freedom and understanding of the news;
- Advocating for media ethics;
- Protecting and preserving local cultures and intercultural dialogue;
- Promoting peace and non-violence.

Previous studies. Several studies have examined the learning objectives, skills, or educational competencies of media literacy curricula in many countries, such as Romania, Latvia, Russia, Uzbekistan, Thailand, and Bahrain, based on UNESCO standards, as well as how to integrate these standards into national education curricula (Alshorooqi and Rawadieh, 2017; Gendina, 2016; Holma et al., 2014; Nupairoj, 2016; Rotaru, 2019).

Fedorov et al. (2016) discussed curricula for MLE according to international experts from 20 countries. Their results showed that the most important priorities of the content that should be included in the curricula to suit each category, starting from pre-school children to the university level and the general audience, are as follows (with different percentages of importance for each category):

- Role of media in a democratic society;
- Access to media sources, enquiry, etc.;
- Social and political implications of media;
- Media representations;
- Media ethics, and peoples' rights and responsibilities;
- Protection from harmful media effects.

As for the most important learning objectives in the media education curricula, the experts identified twenty learning

objectives—for example, for the category of pre-school children, the student will be able to identify some media forms and demonstrate an understanding of some types of media texts. For others, objectives emphasized, in varying degrees, goals such as:

- Critically evaluating media content;
- Analysing and critically evaluating media representations of people, issues, values, and behaviours;
- Demonstrating an understanding of the role and functions of media in democratic societies.

According to Fedorov et al. (2016) the resistance of the administrative bodies, the overloaded curriculum in the classroom, and the poor development of the initial and continuing training for teachers represent the main challenges for media literacy curriculum design and implementation.

Zhang et al. (2020) reviewed the literature that dealt with MLE and its integration into the education curricula over the last three decades. The study compared European and non-European experiences and concluded that there are three main dimensions of MLE objectives, which are the knowledge of media, the creation of media products, and the development of an understanding of mass media. The study revealed a number of differences in the stage of integrating MLE into educational curricula in some countries. Most European countries adopt the integration of MLE into language, social sciences, arts, and information and communication technology courses according to a cross-curriculum approach.

Alcolea-Díaz et al. (2020) discussed the UNESCO MIL curriculum from the perspective of structural considerations of information. The study presented proposals for the development of the curriculum in such a way that enhances critical citizenship and the democratic process. It dealt with five semantic fields of analysis: media groups, consequences, relationship with the economy and politics and technology, a liberal approach, and a critical approach.

Mohebzadeh et al. (2020) compared the curricula of MLE in Canada, Iran, and the United States. The findings reveal the most similarities in the methods of teaching–learning and the most differences in content organization. In the Canadian experience, MLE is presented as one of the necessary language skills at all levels of education, as well as in other courses, such as arts and social studies. In the United States, MLE is represented in various courses and at all levels of education, while in Iran, it is presented in a separate course entitled Thinking and Media Literacy. The study recommended the adoption of the MLE method at all stages of education and the expansion of learning objectives according to the cross and spiral curriculum approach.

Castellví et al. (2022) investigated how future educators can spot online hate speech in Spain and create responses to it. The results show that the majority can recognize hate speech. However, they have more difficulty developing complex alternative narratives. Castellvi et al. (2022, p. 8) emphasized the importance of society's need for "teachers who are able to promote inclusive education for social justice, coexistence and peace" We can find a similar conclusion from (Aririguzoh, 2022) who stressed on the importance of developing communication competencies according to United Nations standards to promote understanding and peace between cultures.

To evaluate Saudi media education curricula, Alheezan (2007) compared them with three American universities and showed a large discrepancy in favour of the American ones. The study suggested revising some courses, adding new courses at advanced specialized levels, and increasing training hours. Kirat (2008) presented a critical reading of the United Arab Emirates' experience in public relations industry and teaching programmes based on the attitudes of students, professors, and practitioners.

Al-Mekkawi (2018) also surveyed the opinions of Emirati journalists to find out the role of media ethics courses in enhancing their professional and ethical formation, with the aim of identifying aspects of academic flaws that should be paid attention to in the knowledge construction of media ethics courses at Arab universities.

Hassan (2018) compared the study plan of two journalism departments in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, indicated that there was a strong discrepancy between them. Zaqzouq (2021) evaluated Saudi journalism education curricula in light of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 by surveying the attitudes of a sample of Jazan University students.

It is noticeable that research efforts evaluating the Arab media education experience have focused on narrow and insufficient parts, and hence this article attempts to try to bridge this gap from an angle related to urgent issues in the Arab region, namely the issues of diversity, pluralism, rights and freedoms.

Methodology

Materials and methods. An analysis of the documentation was quantitatively and qualitatively adopted to identify the items and concepts related to managing diversity in the UNESCO curriculum, and the academic plans of (21) media colleges, departments, and institutes in ten Arab countries.

All study plans for media education in Arab academic institutions were the target population. Due to the difficulty of obtaining all these plans, the convenience sampling (availability sampling) method was adopted by searching the websites of the relevant Arab academic institutions during the study period (February–March 2022).

Table 1 shows the list of Arab colleges, departments, and institutes whose study plans were included in the study.

Table 2 shows the characteristics of the analysis sample, in terms of the geographical distribution and their distribution also in terms of being a college, department, institute, or academy.

Analysis levels. Three levels of analysis were adopted:

• At the first level, the learning objectives contained in all units of the MIL curriculum issued by UNESCO were analysed, as well

Table 1 List of media colleges, departments, and institutes that were included in the analytical study.

1	Abu Dhabi University—College of Arts and Sciences
2	Umm Al-Qura University—Department of Media
3	Umm Al Quwain—the College of Mass Communication
4	UAEU—DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES
5	IMSIU—Media and Communication College
6	Université d'Alger3—Faculté des sciences de l'information et de la communication
7	Zarqa University—Faculty of Media
8	University of Sharjah—College of Communication
9	Sana'a University—Faculty of Mass Communication
10	Ajman University—College of Mass Communication
11	Ain Shams University—Faculty of Arts
12	University of Fujairah—College of Mass Communication & Public Relations
13	Cairo University—Faculty of mass communication
14	Qatar University—The Department of Mass Communication
15	Lebanese American University—MDLAB
16	Misurata University—College of Arts and Media
17	KSU—Mass Communication Department
18	KAU—Faculty of Communication and Media
19	Université de la Manoub—IPSI
20	Jordan Media Institute
21	Institute of Arab Research and Studies

as the specific learning objectives for managing diversity and differences in these units. Here, the category of analysis is the learning objective.

- At the second level, we grouped the categories of analysis (learning objectives) into major items (the main items of managing diversity).
- At the third level, the analytical study of the Arab media education curriculum plans aims to identify the extent of clarity/lack of clarity in the learning objectives associated with managing diversity and difference and to monitor the courses that reinforce these objectives.

The categories of analysis at the first level were the learning objectives in general, while the analysis at the second and third levels focused on the categories of "diversity learning objectives" which mean the objectives of courses or programmes regarding what the teacher intends to teach about skills of managing difference, e.g., acceptance of others, tolerance, dialogue, and the values of freedom, justice and equality.

The definition of weaknesses and strengths in the curriculum plans was adopted by specifying the clarity or lack of clarity of learning objectives in the areas covered by the analysis. An academic plan is considered clear in emphasizing the specific area if it is clearly stated in the general learning objectives of the academic programme or in one course at least, and it is considered unclear if the researcher cannot find any reference to the field in the learning objectives of the academic programme or in the detailed course descriptions.

Results

UNESCO curriculum analysis. Two levels of analysis were adopted for learning objectives in the MIL curriculum issued by UNESCO in its first edition (Wilson et al., 2011) and the second edition (Grizzle et al., 2021).

- At the first level, the learning objectives contained in all units of the curriculum were analysed, as well as the specific learning objectives for managing diversity and differences in these units (see Tables 3 and 4).
- At the second level, a list of items related to managing diversity was compiled. The full list of 79 learning objectives for managing diversity can be found in the supplementary table (see Table 5).

The results show that 44 objectives out of 153, representing 28.8% of the total number of learning objectives, were specific to the skills of managing diversity and differences according to the first edition of the UNESCO curriculum for teachers (Wilson et al., 2011). By contrast, the second edition (Grizzle et al., 2021) included 238 objectives, as seen in Table 4.

Furthermore, 79 objectives out of 238, representing 33.2% of the total number of learning objectives, were specific to the skills of managing diversity according to the second edition of the UNESCO curriculum for educators and learners (Grizzle et al., 2021), with a noticeable increase over the first edition, which indicates increased international interest in developing these skills within the framework of MIL.

In the second stage of the analysis, the study aimed to classify the learning objectives for promoting diversity management into main items or categories, and the analysis at this stage was limited to the second edition of the curriculum for two reasons. First, the first edition was aimed at teachers only, whereas the second edition was developed for teachers and learners. Second, the second edition included many additions to the learning objectives in all aspects of MIL, including skills for managing diversity and differences.

Table 5 shows the distribution of learning objectives for five main categories or items of managing diversity and differences, as follows.

Human rights. The learning objectives related to managing diversity and differences in the UNESCO curriculum focused on the idea of promoting human rights in approximately one-third of the number of objectives, whether the objectives were related to the promotion of knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours. This is consistent with the assertion of the UNESCO literature that MIL is no longer only desirable or only mandatory, but that it is also a human and citizenship right.

Table 2 The characteristics of the analysis sample.		
	N = 21	**%**
UAE	6	28.6
KSA	4	19.0
Egypt	3	14.3
Jordan	2	9.5
Lebanon	1	4.8
Qatar	1	4.7
Tunisia	1	4.7
Algeria	1	4.7
Libya	1	4.7
Yemen	1	4.7
College	11	52.4
Department	7	33.3
Institute/Academy	3	14.3

Table 3 The learning objectives in the UNESCO curriculum (Wilson et al., 2011) and the specific learning objectives for managing diversity.			
Module	**Unit**	**Learning objectives**	**The specific learning objectives for managing diversity**
1: Citizenship, Freedom of Expression and Information, Access to Information, Democratic Discourse and Life-Long Learning	4	11	3
2: Understanding the News, Media, and Information Ethics	4	15	9
3: Representation in Media and Information	5	25	18
4: Languages in Media and Information	4	13	2
5: Advertising	5	24	1
6: New and Traditional Media	3	12	4
7: Internet Opportunities and Challenges	2	7	1
8: Information Literacy and Library Skills	3	15	1
9: Communication, MIL and Learning—a Capstone Module	3	7	0
10: Audience	1	6	0
11: Media, Technology and the Global Village	4	18	5
Total		153	44

Table 4 The learning objectives in the UNESCO curriculum (Grizzle et al., 2021) and the specific learning objectives for managing diversity.

Module	Unit	Learning objectives	The specific learning objectives for managing diversity
1: A foundational module: an introduction to media & information literacy and other key concepts	5	15	7
2: Understanding Information and Technology	4	14	8
3: Research, Information Cycle, Digital Information Processing, Intellectual Property	7	31	4
4: Media and Information Literacy Competencies to Tackle Misinformation, Disinformation and Hate Speech: In Defense of Truth-Seeking and Peace	5	16	7
5: Audiences as citizens	4	17	7
6: Representation in Media and Information: Highlighting Gender Equality	5	23	12
7: How Media and Technology Influence Content	4	13	2
8: Privacy, Data Protection and You	3	12	9
9: Internet Opportunities and Challenges	4	15	4
10: Advertising and Media and Information Literacy	5	25	5
11: Artificial Intelligence, Social Media and MIL Competencies	4	17	6
12: Digital Media, Games and Traditional Media	3	12	3
13: Media, Technology and The Sustainable Development Goals: The MIL Context	5	21	4
14: Communication and Information, MIL and Learning—A Capstone Module	3	7	1
Total		238	79

Table 5 The specific learning objectives for managing diversity in the UNESCO curriculum (Grizzle et al., 2021).

Categories of managing diversity	N	%
Human rights	26	32.9
Pluralism and democratic practice	17	21.5
Culture of dialogue, peace, intercultural understanding, and combating extremism and hate speech	13	16.5
Media ethics	13	16.5
Promoting equality, empowering women, and combating racial discrimination	10	12.6
Total	79	100

The texts of learning objectives in the category of promoting human rights (26 objectives) in total revolve around considering MIL skills an integral part of human rights in the modern era, such as critical interaction with sources of information, verification, resistance to misinformation and disinformation, the protection of privacy and personal information, and the capacity for self-expression freely and consciously in the digital space. Knowledge of the opportunities and risks of using the Internet will enhance the awareness of human rights individually and socially, in addition to knowledge of modern technical topics such as artificial intelligence and how to make conscious use of it in the new media space. Achieving these goals would protect personal and social choices and would preserve the diversity of society.

Pluralism and democratic practice. Among the learning objectives included in the analysis, there are 17 objectives in the category of promoting pluralism and democratic practice. This area deals with enhancing the skills, knowledge, and behaviours related to expressing opinions, the global principles of press freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of information transfer, and civic participation. The role of citizen journalists who possess MIL skills, regarding the multiple and alternative types of media, would serve the democratic process and free public debate.

The learning objectives in this category also deal with identifying the methods of disinformation, emotional attraction, technology dominators, and their impact on the transparency of society, political choices, and popular participation in some events, such as elections.

The learning objectives in this category link all of the above to establishing good governance and media surveillance over the performance of authorities, artificial intelligence democracy, and sustainable development.

Culture of dialogue, peace, intercultural understanding, and combating extremism and hate speech. The learning objectives in this category included 13 objectives focusing on the importance of the critical thinking contribution and MIL to multicultural production, dialogue and cultural exchange, the promotion of common human values, and the respect of diversity and difference, up to the foundation of the global citizenship concept and its applications in production, consumption, and media participation in the context of globalization.

It also includes objectives related to evaluating the available mechanisms and their efficiency in combating misinformation and hate speech, especially on the Internet and social media. The objectives propose identifying and evaluating communicative symbols in media production, such as identifying the semantics of communicative symbols that are used in popular films in another country and identifying MIL initiatives locally and globally.

Media ethics. Thirteen learning objectives included in the analysis focused mostly on understanding and analysing the ethical aspects of the media and journalistic work at the personal and institutional levels. They dealt with this topic in local, regional, and international experiences, such as aspects of the ethical and responsible use of information sources, codes of ethics and their applications in various media content, whether in the traditional or online media, the extent of its effectiveness and the proposals for its development in line with the new media reality, and the ethical aspects of the advertising industry and intellectual property rights.

The learning objectives in this category also point to the importance of learning about copyright and respecting privacy, as well as the fundamentals of artificial intelligence governance, with its ethical and regulatory aspects.

Promoting equality, empowering women, and combating racial discrimination. The learning objectives included in the analysis

Table 6 The strengths and weaknesses of the Arab media education curricula with regard to diversity management items.

Categories of managing diversity	adu. ac.ae	uqu. edu.sa	uaqu. ac.ae	uaeu. ac.ae	imamu. edu.sa	univ-alger3.dz	zu. edu.jo	sharjah. ac.ae	su. edu.ye	ajman. ac.ae	asu. edu.eg	uof. ac.ae	cu. edu.eg	qu. edu.qa	lau. edu.lb	misuratau. edu.ly	Ksu. edu.sa	kau. edu.sa	rmu.tn	jmi. edu.jo	iars. net	Total (21)
1. Human rights	×	×	√	×	×	×	×	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	×	√	√	√	√	×	12
2. Pluralism and democratic practice	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	√	√	×	√	×	√	√	√	×	√	√	√	√	×	8
3. Culture of dialogue, peace...	√	√	×	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	17
4. Media ethics	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	21
5. Promoting equality, empowering women...	×	×	√	√	×	×	×	√	×	×	×	×	×	√	√	×	×	×	√	×	×	6

(√) clear; (×) unclear.

set out ten objectives that focus on issues of media representation by gender or ethnicity. They deal with the impact of media representations on our lives through various types of digital and traditional platforms, such as films, television programmes, print media, music, and advertisements.

This area also deals with the impact of the decision-making process, the policies, and the characteristics of content providers regarding diversity, equality, and justice, as well as its reflection on the public and on the methods of media coverage of various issues, and the impact of marketing methods on consumer decisions and values such as gender equality and combating racial discrimination.

In this category, the learning objectives were also concerned with evaluating the role of alternative media and their impacts on societies, especially in providing marginalized groups with sufficient space to express their views and to make their voice heard.

Analysis of the Arab media education curricula. The analytical study included the academic plans of 21 colleges, departments, and institutes specializing in the field of media and communication in ten Arab countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Qatar, Yemen, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya). They were obtained from the official websites of these institutions during the period of study (February–March 2022).

The analysis aimed to identify the extent of clarity/lack of clarity of the five items related to the management of diversity and differences in these academic plans, and to identify the courses that enhance the skills and learning outcomes in these areas.

Some academic plans, such as those for the universities of Jordan's Zarqa, Ajman in the UAE, King Saud of Saudi Arabia, and the Institute of Arab Research and Studies, have adopted an independent course for media education, as an optional course for media students within a package of other modules, from which a student can choose a certain number of hours. Other plans (Imam and King Abdulaziz in Saudi Arabia, and in Fujairah and Ajman in the UAE) included courses that focus on specific aspects of MLE, such as critical thinking and media criticism courses. The experience of the Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut, which was established in 2013, represents a distinct experience, with its full focus on MIL and its related topics. The academy has a tangible role in this field through its clear efforts in developing courses, curricula, and training courses.

Table 6 shows that the emphasis on adherence to media ethics was the most important area emphasized by all Arab academic plans. This was mostly through offering a course on media ethics and laws, or through more specific courses that deal with public relations ethics, journalism ethics, advertising ethics, and audio-visual media ethics. In some cases, this was achieved through at least one item in the descriptions of other courses, such as media criticism, electronic journalism, citizen journalism, investigative journalism, and photojournalism—as shown in Table 7.

Results show that the emphasis on promoting a culture of dialogue, peace, and understanding between cultures and combating extremism and hate speech constituted the second category. It was clearly emphasized by 17 out of 21 academic plans included in the analysis (see Table 6).

The courses that enhanced these items varied from a compulsory requirement taught to media students and others, such as history and human culture or contemporary intellectual and artistic currents, or within specialized courses, such as international communication, intercultural communication, media globalization, media and development issues, and contemporary issues in mass communication.

The third category is the promotion of human rights. Results indicate that it was evident in 12 out of 21 academic plans

Table 7 The courses that develop the skills of managing diversity in the Arab media education curricula.	
Categories of managing diversity	**The courses**
1. Human rights	Human rights in Islam and international conventions/Human rights in the modern era/Human rights/Ethics and citizenship rights/Human rights and anti-corruption/Society and Human Rights/A special topic in the media
2. Pluralism and democratic practice	Contemporary Issues in Mass Communication/Good Governance and Ethics/Media and Development Issues/Political Communication/Human Rights and Anti-Corruption/Contemporary Media Environment and Communication Policies
3. Culture of dialogue, peace, etc.	International Communication/Cultural Communication/Media and Globalization/Contemporary Issues in Mass Communication/History of Civilizations/Terror Crimes/History and Human Culture/Media and Development Issues/Coexistence of Cultures/Contemporary Intellectual and Artistic Currents/International Media through the Cultures/Global Communication/Philosophy and Cultural Studies
4. Media ethics	Media Laws and Ethics/Media Criticism/Media Regulations/Media Ethics and Legislation/Introduction to Journalism/Online Journalism/Citizen Journalism—Investigative Journalism/Press Law and Ethics/Principles of Professional Ethics/Regulations and Ethics in Radio and Television/Public Relations Ethics/Photojournalism/Journalism Ethics/Good Governance and Professional Ethics/Principles of Ethics/Audio-Visual Media Ethics
5. Promoting equality, empowering women, etc.	Media and Development/Sustainability/Contemporary Issues in Mass Communication/Women and Development/Women and the Media

included in the analysis. It is mostly included within courses that represent a general requirement studied by media students and others, such as human rights in Islam and international covenants, human rights in the modern era, and citizenship. These topics are also included in the descriptions of some specialized courses, such as a course on a special topic in the media.

A lack of clarity in the plans in the items on promoting pluralism and democratic practice, promoting equality, and empowering women was the main weakness, out of 21 academic plans, they were only clear in 8 plans for promoting pluralism and democratic practice, and 6 plans for empowering women as shown in Table 6. The courses that reinforce these items are few, the most prominent of which are media and development and media and contemporary issues.

Discussion
The results of the current study showed an increased international interest in developing the skills of managing diversity and difference within the framework of the MIL (from 29% in 2011 to 33% in 2021) according to the learning objectives of the UNESCO curriculum. The results indicate that 79 objectives out of 238, representing 33.2% of the total number of MIL learning objectives, were specific to the skills of managing diversity. The study classified these objectives into five main categories: promoting human rights, equality, pluralism, a culture of dialogue, and media ethics. To define these five main categories, the study relied on grouping all similar learning objectives into sub-categories that accommodate all the objectives of diversity and pluralism.

Researchers have emphasized a number of goals that promote coexistence in pluralistic societies, such as "democratic participation and active citizenship […], knowledge economy, competition and choice […], lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment" (Livingstone et al., 2008, p.18). The prevailing trend in many developed countries is to integrate these items and the related MIL's topics at all educational levels within courses such as language, social sciences, and arts in a cross-curriculum approach (Mohebzadeh et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

Annamária Neag and her colleague posited that intercultural MLE for diverse societies encompasses each of these purposes, "even if relevant literature only addresses it as a secondary or marginal dimension of literacy's desired consequences". As the principles of critical MLE are necessary for pluralistic and diverse

societies, and that it is not limited only to marginalized groups, but the entire society as a whole, because "diversity is not only a responsibility or burden of minorities, migrants and refugees", MLE provides people with the skills necessary to raise their voices and be represented through media production and participation, and it should also include the promotion of a culture of listening to all voices (Neag et al., 2022, p. 5, 13, 14).

MLE has been provided in various forms, "ranging from elective to core-curriculum activities, train-the-trainer sessions, government campaigns to smartphone apps" (Neag et al., 2022, p. 1). It can provide a framework for developing the content of the learning outcomes and objectives of the Bachelor of Arts in Media and Communication programmes, and qualifying graduates to become both effective and efficient media producers and consumers, or "media prosumers" (Alagaran, 2013, p. 406).

Most MENA countries are among the worst in the world in terms of rights, freedoms and pluralism. This study took this important perspective to evaluate the learning objectives in Arab media education curricula, to determine the extent to which they are in step with international standards and to identify weaknesses, as a prelude to adopting real reform processes from a media education perspective to sustainably improve the issues of rights, freedoms, pluralism and the acceptance of others.

The analysis of 21 Arab academic plans in the field of media showed that the five areas of promoting human rights, equality, pluralism, a culture of dialogue, and media ethics have been distributed as learning objectives in a number of courses, some of which are compulsory and some of which are optional, with some being specific to media students and some of them being general requirements for media students with their colleagues in other departments and colleges. Few academic plans adopted a separate course for MIL.

The emphasis on adherence to media ethics was the most evident in all the Arab academic plans covered by this study, as well as, to a lesser extent, the emphasis on promoting a culture of dialogue, peace, and understanding between cultures, combating extremism and hate speech, and promoting human rights. These three areas include agreed general lines and are often not affected by the differences in the educational system or the political system, while the disparities are more pronounced with regard to diversity and difference from the perspectives of pluralism, democratic participation, equality, and empowering women. This may be due to the presence of political and religious prohibitions in some countries, which may lead to the failure to address these

issues directly, clearly, and uniformly in the educational curricula, whether in the MIL field or other fields.

The United Nations development plans have touched on important aspects of people's needs, which some researchers have pointed out, such as Alagaran II, Grizzle, Mathur, and Rachmiati and Maulana (Alagaran, 2015; Grizzle, 2015; Mathur, 2015; Rachmiati and Maulana, 2015). This could benefit from an approach to the objectives and outcomes of learning in the Arab media education curricula in a way that serves the goals of development and stability and strengthens the margins of freedom. Jose Reuben Alagaran presented a new model for integrating MIL into the communication curriculum to reflect the main goals of the Post-2015 Development Agenda of the United Nations. He pointed out that MIL may promote sustainable development goals through "awareness and understanding of development issues such as education, governance and human rights, poverty, climate and energy, health, women empowerment, water and sanitation, food and agriculture, peace and stability, and infrastructure and technology" (Alagaran, 2015, p. 34).

Alton Grizzle suggested developing indicators to measure the level of information and media competency for all citizens around the world in parallel by measuring the indicators of the sustainable development goals around the world, because they are linked to each other and because MLE will motivate people to participate in sustainable development (Grizzle, 2015).

Neelima Mathur linked overcoming the huge burden of achieving the new sustainable development goals to the development of media and information policies (as is the case in India). She emphasized the need to "empower citizens with competencies and ensure democracy is enhanced and not disintegrated into a cacophony of voices in cyberspace leading to social instability" (Mathur, 2015, p. 167).

In the Indonesian experience, Rachmiati and Maulana (2015) stressed the importance of achieving development goals and empowering women through MLE. They suggested improving women's life skills through local culture arts and MIL to empower women in their environment. However, there is still much to be done before real media culture can help bring about a real and important change in Arab societies, as Melki (2018) pointed out. He stressed the importance of MLE being accompanied by vivid examples and models from the local environment; otherwise, it would be misleading.

As for the lack of clarity regarding pluralism, democratic participation, and women's empowerment in the Arab academic plans covered by the study, it should be viewed from two perspectives: first, working to approach international standards in this field, taking into account not to jump on the local reality; second, dealing with MIL as a comprehensive and complex concept to achieve the goals of education and development in its personal, cultural, social, political, and economic aspects, as emphasized by UNESCO (Grizzle, 2015).

Jad Melki, an expert on Arab MLE, stressed the need to focus on preserving pluralism and political stability at the same time in weak countries, especially during transitional periods, so that they do not fall back into autocratic tendencies again. Civic participation and activism are the basis of MLE, and training on digital tools must take place within the context of local needs. Therefore, the import of Western educational curricula by Arab universities in the field of MLE will lead to failure, as the media education literature that has been developed by American researchers has been recycled in the Arab region since 2013. The individualistic philosophy dominates the curricula of Western media literacy pedagogies, in contrast to the societal philosophy best suited to the conditions of the Arab region, which emphasizes the empowerment of societies, the recognition of

shared collective memory, and common grievances (Melki, 2018, pp. 9–11). Media literacy among the oppressed would better be positioned with "changing discriminatory laws that help maintain the status quo, inventing new economic opportunities that empower local communities, and inspiring new forms of knowledge that reach diverse local communities" (Melki, 2018, p. 8).

On the topic of empowering Arab women, for example, Melki (2018) proposed a form of communal feminism that reshapes these rights and relationships from a local perspective while not neglecting external influences. In India, there is talk of empowering women through facilitating access to relevant information and the transfer of knowledge based on needs, and the improvement of knowledge infrastructure, especially in rural areas (Malhan and Katoch, 2020, p. 233), which is similar to the Arab context. It is different from the European and American experiences. Because of the diversity of sub-cultures, different educational levels, and the prevalence of illiteracy among women, Arab countries require a needs-based approach to create special models for MIL to empower women, which do not necessarily match the European and American models.

Based on the foregoing, MIL programmes should be adapted to be appropriate to the needs of local communities; with regard to empowering women, priority may be given to motivating women to search for useful information and benefit from it effectively, and to encourage them to follow the path of lifelong education, because empowering women will directly lead to an enhancement in the contribution to social and economic development, which is consistent with the needs of many Arab countries.

Conclusion

The results revealed that Arab media education curricula keep pace with international standards by emphasizing adherence to media ethics and promoting human rights and a culture of dialogue, peace and understanding between cultures. However, they were ambiguous about pluralism, democratic participation, and women's empowerment. The media is not considered the only actor shaping these issues. Rather, they are influenced by a variety of cultural, political and social factors.

Given the increasing role of the media in light of major developments in communication and information technologies, as well as their implications and effects that extend beyond developed countries, this study sought to explore the roots of the media role and evaluate media education curricula. This approach was used to assess the role of these curricula in enhancing the skills of journalists in managing diversity and difference, especially since most countries in the MENA region have faced real problems on these issues according to international standards and indicators.

This article provided a broad and focused assessment at the same time. It is a broad assessment in terms of including 21 study plans in ten Arab countries in the MENA region, while it is a focused evaluation by examining the specific areas of learning objectives for managing diversity and difference. The findings may shed light on the service of Arab media education towards long-term differences in sustainable development goals, promoting spaces of pluralism and enhancing women's participation.

The development of Arabic media education curricula needs the development of learning objectives that promote the acceptance of pluralism, diversity and equality just as much as it needs to stay in accordance with the demands of the labour market because sustainable development is not only based on economics. Human well-being can be ensured by strengthening spaces of coexistence and the acceptance of others and by improving economic levels and political stability at the same time.

In this context, Arab countries can benefit from pioneering experiences in other parts of the world, whether in the advanced experience of the West or the experiences of other Asian and Latin American countries with a background of social, economic and cultural conditions close to the Arab region.

Dealing with MIL as a comprehensive and complex concept to achieve educational and development goals will broaden the horizons of researchers, professors, and policy-makers in the fields of media, education, educational planning, and professional academic qualifications. This perspective can help to develop national strategic goals in which media education plays a critical role in improving indicators of the acceptance of pluralism and in increasing women's participation in Arab countries.

Policy implications, and future studies

The results of this study should be interpreted within its limitations. It was performed through an analysis of a sample of Arab media education curricula in light of the UNESCO MIL curriculum, and the adoption of more in-depth analysis methods will be needed to identify the categories of enhancing diversity management in the plans and syllabuses of teaching and training. Moreover, we require knowledge about the roles of families, schools, universities, places of worship, clubs, and all institutions of socialization.

We also recommend conducting additional research on the five areas of managing diversity and difference as learning objectives in all Arab educational curricula and at all stages. The literature of UNESCO and the experiences of many developed countries do not link them to a specific age group or specialization. Scientific and practical discussions among decision-makers and academic experts in Arab educational institutions seem to be essential to develop and integrate MIL into the curricula of media students in line with advanced global visions. In addition, we need to take into account Arab cultural privacy in a manner that serves to qualify Arab media professionals to face future challenges and actively contribute to development issues.

Data availability

The datasets underlying this study are available in the Dataverse repository: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MEFOI5.

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