

## Mapping the Information Landscapes of Sudanese Youth: Implications for Media Literacy Education

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Seeking to expand the Western-centric scope of media literacy research, this article shines the spotlight on Sudan as a critically underexplored context. Using participatory mapping and in-depth interviews, our research foregrounds urban Sudanese youths' everyday informational resources and practices as a necessary foundation for a culturally responsive approach to media literacy education. We find that young people's information landscapes are heavily molded by the country's political context: Sudan's political instability and economic precarity increase the urgency and speed of information exchanges, while the prevalence of propaganda highlights the need for authentic, trustworthy information. This focus on usefulness and authenticity consequently shapes a preference for interpersonal communication and digital spaces as key informational channels. At the same time, our analysis reveals significant differences in young people's information landscapes, particularly along gender lines. Based on these findings, we outline key implications for culturally responsive media literacy interventions.

*Keywords: media literacy, information literacy, information landscapes, participatory mapping, Sudan, youth, gender*

In the face of global threats like misinformation, propaganda, and polarization, media literacy<sup>1</sup>—understood as citizens' ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce different forms of media (Aufderheide, 1993)—is vital to the functioning of democracy and civil society and is a key element in ameliorating the civic reality of developing countries (Mihailidis, 2009). However, in line with larger patterns in communication research (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018), the field of media literacy is still predominantly Western-centric (Bozdağ, Neag, & Leurs, 2022; Melki, 2018). As Melki (2018) notes, media literacy scholarship and curricula have historically matured in "relatively stable Western democracies with defined economies and

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<sup>1</sup> As Wuyckens and colleagues (2022) argue, the field of media literacy research is characterized by a proliferation of closely related concepts (e.g., media literacy, information literacy, media, and information literacy) and an insufficient theorization of their respective boundaries and overlaps (p. 177). While acknowledging this larger context, we chose to use "media literacy" here as a widely accepted term.

political cultures” and are designed to address the problems that characterize these societies (p. 6). The field has rarely dealt with fragile states’ contexts of prolonged conflict, migration, political and economic instability, and limited freedom of speech—such as those characterizing the site of our research, Sudan.

Using participatory mapping and in-depth interviews, this research attempts to foreground urban Sudanese youths’ everyday informational resources and practices as a necessary foundation for a culturally responsive approach to media literacy education. To do so, we deploy the concept of information landscapes (Lloyd, 2010), which helps illuminate how information is used in a specific communicative context. This stems from an understanding of information literacy as a sociocultural practice, whereby in each context or setting there are certain practices that are collectively valued. Our population of interest is youth, who represent both a key focus for media literacy interventions and a primary demographic in Sudan (where almost two-thirds of the population is under 25; United Nations, 2021). This study therefore asks: *How do urban Sudanese youth construct and navigate their information landscapes?*

Shining a spotlight on Sudan, this article contributes to the growing field of media literacy research by decentring its Western focus and expanding its scope to a country in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region—a critically underexplored context in this field of media literacy research (Melki & Maaliki, 2013).<sup>2</sup> In the final section of this article, we highlight our most significant findings and the potential implications they hold for the design and implementation of media literacy initiatives. Our work thus advocates for a culturally sensitive approach to media literacy education, based on a nuanced understanding of the informational practices and the needs and values of youth in this specific cultural milieu (Chambers, Notley, Dezuanni, & Park, 2022; Seufferling, Forsler, King, Löfgren, & Saati, 2023). Finally, by exploring the media and information practices of urban Sudanese youth, our work hopes to put Sudan on the map of global youth studies.

## **Background**

### ***The Sociopolitical and Informational Context of Sudan***

Sudan has a set of unique characteristics that shape the media and information practices of its young citizens. The country has had a long history of authoritarian rule, conflict, economic turmoil, political instability, and high rates of migration, rendering it a fragile state. Since the declaration of independence in 1956, Sudan has enjoyed only a total of seven years of democratic rule (1956–1958 and 1964–1969). Apart from these two short-lived democracies, various regimes have succeeded one another, suppressing any opposition. The Islamist regime was the last to take over in 1989 through a military coup, assuming control for nearly 30 years. In late 2019, the December Revolution took place, deposing Omar Al-Bashir (the head of the 30-year-old Islamist regime), and by mid-2020, a transitional government composed of civilians and military personnel was established. That was short lived, however, because in October 2021, the military dissolved civilian rule and took full control of the country in yet another military coup.

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<sup>2</sup> To describe the region, this article uses Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), a term that “suffers less from ethnocentrism and that is far less ambiguous” (Rahme, 1999, p. 478), compared with the commonly used, Western-centric term Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The Sudanese youth featured in this study grew up under the Islamist regime, where media and education—and their intersection with religion—were the most prominent tools used by Al-Bashir’s regime to suppress the plurality of thought and indoctrinate the citizenry. Since the 1989 coup, mainstream media and national school curricula have been radically Islamized, helping the regime stay in power (Kadoda & Hale, 2015). Freedom of speech was also highly restricted, with Sudan ranking 175th out of 180 countries on the Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2019) and 162nd out of 165 countries on the Human Freedom Index (Vásquez, McMahon, Murphy, & Schneider, 2021).

Although more than two-thirds of the Sudanese population remain offline and rely on television, radio, and print media, access to the Internet is growing steadily, with the Internet penetration rate reaching 28% (World Bank, 2021). Social media use is also on the rise. In particular, WhatsApp is a popular channel for socializing and sharing news, entertainment, and personal updates—though often for spreading misinformation and rumors as well (Ali, 2021). Facebook and Twitter are the go-to platforms among young people; while they facilitate youth expression on various topics (including social and political ones), these platforms are nevertheless monitored by the regime with help from telecommunication companies owned by government supporters (Eltigani, 2020). Online bloggers and activists are occasionally arrested for posting content that is considered a threat to national security in the eyes of the regime.

#### ***Media Literacy in the SWANA Region: Moving Beyond Western-Centrism***

Both the study and implementation of media literacy are in an incipient phase in the larger SWANA region but are still largely absent in Sudan (Grizzle, 2016). Melki and Maaliki (2013) list several challenges to media literacy in the region, including reduced freedom of expression as a result of oppressive, authoritative governments, poor education systems due to fragility of states, and hesitancy or even opposition from SWANA media academics. Grizzle (2016) added to this list the lack of agreement between media experts and educators on the conceptualization of media literacy in the region, which impedes opportunities for partnership and knowledge exchange and directly affects how media literacy initiatives are conceived and implemented.

Significantly, Melki (2015) deemed the dearth of local studies the major obstacle to the development of media literacy in the SWANA region. He specifically called out the lack of research on the media practices of Arabic-speaking youth in the region, which hindered the development of context-sensitive educational initiatives and curricula. Although research has explored how youth in the SWANA region used social media for mobilization during the Arab Spring (see, e.g., Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), little is known about young people’s everyday media and information practices. As a result, much media literacy education still relies on Western materials that are designed in a vastly different setting and are shaped by specific assumptions—e.g., about political systems, media ownership and surveillance, access to education, and learners’ media practices—that speak less to the contexts and experiences of SWANA youth (Melki, 2018).

Therefore, any attempt to develop media literacy education in this context requires a deep understanding of the local media ecosystem (particularly how media practices have been shaped by political circumstances, such as colonization, authoritarianism, and later, the Arab Spring), as well as an in-depth consideration of indigenous modes of communication that are influenced by the Arab-Islamic legacy and

cultural values (Schmoll, 2021). This line of inquiry is essential for informing global media studies scholarship with critically needed local knowledge (Kraidy, 2018, p. 340) and challenging the Western, parochial view that sees *other* communicative models as subordinate (Curran & Park, 2000; Wang, 2010). Here, the aim is not to deepen the divide between Western and non-Western paradigms (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014), but rather to bring attention to how the issues of race, racism, and colonialism determine the authoritative voices in the field (Hirji, Jiwani, McAllister, & Russill, 2021).

In the present study, we contribute to the broadening of media literacy research beyond Western contexts by deploying the concept of information landscapes as a lens into urban Sudanese young people's quotidian encounters with media and information.

### ***Information Landscapes***

The concept of information landscapes (Lloyd, 2006) stems from the understanding that literacy, broadly defined, is operationalized through context-specific practices. In recognition of the context-dependent nature of literacy, Lloyd (2011) developed the concept of information landscapes to capture the "situated, collective, and embodied practice[s]" that are valued or legitimized in one setting but not necessarily in another (p. 277). Lloyd and colleagues (2013) deployed this notion to showcase how the displacement of refugees distorted their original information landscapes, urging them to adapt and learn how to efficiently navigate new information landscapes. They argue that what it takes to be (information) literate in a setting is collectively negotiated and highly dependent on a specific time and space.

The nuances of information landscapes can surface richly through mapping. Mapping is a visual articulation of the perceived relevance of sources and practices at a certain time and place that explains the tacit relationships between the various elements of one's information landscape (Whitworth, 2020). The mapping process thus facilitates a rich snapshot of youth experiences, understandings, and dispositions toward information in a way that is otherwise unattainable via text (Lloyd, 2010)—and, importantly, pins these experiences, understandings, and dispositions into a very specific geographical and temporal context (Crang & Thrift, 2000).

Applied to media literacy, the concept of information landscapes draws attention to a set of skills and practices collectively sanctioned in a certain community. In this view, the development of media literacy is the process of stewarding and nurturing these landscapes while assessing and strengthening the relationships between relevant landscape elements (Whitworth, 2020). However, as Carbo (2013) puts it, this process must begin with a key question: "What are the needs and wants of individuals from different cultures and backgrounds and with different ways of thinking and knowing?" (p. 99). Here, we take on this inquiry by mapping the information landscapes of urban Sudanese youth as a necessary foundation for a culturally responsive approach to media literacy education.

### **Methods**

Our research design involved a mapmaking activity, followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview, integrating visual and verbal tools to "capture the variety and richness of data" (Sonnenwald,

Wildemuth, & Harmon, 2001, p. 15) and “yield deeper, more complex data than otherwise can be collected” (Copeland & Agosto, 2012, p. 517). The participatory mapping aimed to offer “an inclusive, co-constructed take on the process of mapmaking,” helping youth gain a sense of ownership over the account of their own information landscapes while simultaneously anchoring the follow-up interviews (Literat, 2013, pp. 198–199). The interviews then facilitated a firsthand explanation of the participants’ maps that preempted potential misinterpretations or omissions by the researchers (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). The participants’ elaborations in the interviews also expanded beyond their maps to cover other aspects relevant to young people’s information landscapes and practices.

The recruitment was conducted via social media posts on public Sudanese Facebook and WhatsApp groups that catered to young people. To ensure broad reach and increase potential diversity, these online groups spanned a wide range of interests and foci, including political forums, marketplace communities, music, pop culture, education, and soccer groups. While 20 respondents expressed interest, we further culled down the list to 12, striving for diversity in terms of age, gender, occupation, and geographic location (see Table 1). The participants included in this study are therefore 12 Sudanese youth aged 18 to 27 years old. Half of them identified as male and half as female.

Geographically, participants represented all seven localities of Khartoum State (the most populous state with more than 9 million residents, one-fifth of Sudan’s total population; United Nations, 2021). However, it is important to note that Khartoum State is an urban area with a relatively higher rate of Internet access compared with other parts of Sudan; reaching rural participants would have required the researchers to travel to these areas and collect the data in person, which was unfeasible at the time of data collection. Therefore, we qualify our findings as relating specifically to the perspectives and practices of *urban* youth (see also Kadoda & Hale, 2015), and we further discuss this limitation in the closing section of this article.

**Table 1. Overview of Participants.**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Occupation
Adil	18	male	Jabal Awliya	student
Ali	24	male	Khartoum North	video editor
Hamid	25	male	Sharq Elnil	engineer
Mohammed	24	male	Omdurman	engineer
Moneera	23	female	Karari	graphic designer
Musa	18	male	Ombadda	student
Nawal	20	female	Sharq Elnil	student
Rawan	23	female	Khartoum	medical professional
Rayyan	23	female	Omdurman	freelance art director
Samreen	26	female	Khartoum North	media producer
Yusra	22	female	Karari	architect
Zain	27	male	Khartoum	media director

Participants were first sent a mapping guidelines sheet before the interview, to allow them to work on the maps in their own time, while also providing necessary structure in line with the focus of the research (Meyer, 1991). The guidelines prompted participants to map out their everyday information practices and sources, first by recalling the preceding day and then by considering other days and adding elements as necessary. The mapping instructions were in Arabic<sup>3</sup> and most participants used Arabic for any text appearing in their maps, though a few included English annotations too. On completion, they sent the map via e-mail or WhatsApp to the first author, who then scheduled and conducted the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted through Zoom and WhatsApp video calls. The first section of the interview protocol included questions about the participants' day-to-day media and information practices, while the second part of the interview was devoted to walking through and elaborating on the interviewee's map. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, and the first author translated the participants' maps and interview responses into English. As per our approved Institutional Review Board protocol, confidentiality was ensured throughout the recruitment, data collection, and data analysis stages. We obtained consent from the participants before data collection, anonymized all personal identifiable information, and used pseudonyms throughout.

In line with established guidelines on working with participant-created visual data (see, e.g., Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Literat, 2013; Meyer, 1991), the maps were analyzed in conjunction with participants' own explanations to ensure contextualization and accuracy of interpretation. This individual level of map analysis was accompanied by a group-level examination to facilitate discerning overall patterns by looking at the group of participants as a whole (Copeland & Agosto, 2012). Similarly, the interview data were thematically analyzed to identify key patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) related to the participants' media and information practices: Interview responses were initially transcribed and translated by the first author; then, both investigators analyzed the whole dataset, taking extensive notes and identifying recurring subthemes; finally, subthemes were subsequently categorized under encompassing themes in an ongoing and iterative process that the investigators engaged in collaboratively (King, 2004). Finally, the findings were reported under the following main categories: how political reality shapes youth information practice; interpersonal communication as a crucial source of information and an entry point for media literacy; the need for digital platforms to combat precarity and attain agency; and how gender limits information landscapes in conservative cultural contexts.

## Findings

### ***"Sudan Changes by the Second": How the Political Context Shapes Youths' Everyday Information Landscapes***

The political situation in Sudan, and more precisely the recent revolution, came up in every interview, revealing how the political context shapes young people's everyday information landscapes—and the deployment of media literacy in practice. In particular, the youth mentioned two political factors that

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<sup>3</sup> While Sudan is home to more than 100 indigenous languages, (Sudanese) Arabic is the most common tongue.

were highly relevant to their media and information practices: (1) Sudan's political instability and economic precarity, which underscored a need to find and verify relevant information quickly, and (2) the prevalence of government-backed propaganda, which translated into a desire for authentic, trustworthy information that had not been manipulated.

As shared by the youth in our study, the instability and economic precarity caused by Sudan's recent political upheavals made it crucial to obtain the necessary information quickly and accurately. In other words, it imbued them with a sense of urgency about information seeking. Most participants mentioned the road blockades and protests that they needed to know about daily (either to avoid the resulting traffic or to join the protests), as well as the rapidly changing economic situation, which required them to get up-to-date information about the fluctuating exchange rate of the US dollar<sup>4</sup> or the availability of products like gas or bread. As Moneera put it,

Sudan changes by the second. Unpredictable. You cannot rely on one thing and say that today is going to look like this, or this street is gonna be this, or a certain item will have this price. . . . It's just about [information] collection, collection, collection.

This context has significant implications for media literacy, as it foregrounds the urgency of not only seeking information but verifying its accuracy too—especially since, as Rawan put it, “one piece of information can change someone's life.” Indeed, information accuracy is seen as vital in this context, needing to be assessed quickly: “The situation in Sudan requires you to double-check and verify everything, especially on social media” (Yusra). Many interviewees mentioned that they relied on their guts or intuitions to determine the credibility of information, given the speed with which such assessments had to be made.

The political and economic instability in Sudan also created a general feeling of exhaustion among the interviewees, who reported being overwhelmed by the constant need to seek information and the influx of depressing news. Participants expressed a sense of information overload, and some said they often needed to take breaks from media consumption:

The intensity of information and emotion are just too much. . . I just want some peace of mind at this point. . . I'm also trying to reduce my social media intake in the morning because it really screws up the day. Like, imagine waking up to the news of a military coup or a massacre. (Zain)

Especially after the military coup, everything is gloomy. . . I often use [my phone] as an escape from information in real life. And sometimes I also escape from it when I encounter depressing news like hearing about a number of casualties. (Nawal)

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the historically-high inflation rate of 382.8% (World Bank, 2021), the US dollar has increasingly been used as a steadier monetary measure by Sudanese consumers, despite not being officially pegged by the Sudanese pound. This has been a common practice since 2019, due to the political and economic turmoil.

Our findings revealed that youth were keenly aware of state-backed mis- and disinformation. In both maps and post-mapping interviews, participants explicitly brought up topics, such as propaganda, censorship, “news blackouts,” and freedom of speech. Discussing her map, where a television set was captioned as something “impossible to rely on,” Moneera shared how she came to be aware of propaganda in the Sudanese media ecosystem:

I think this became apparent to me after the military coup. Hmm, actually, even before that. They would also spread rumors—like, the price of bread will double or something. Agitating people and public opinion. . . Like, you’re already uncertain about something, you become even more uncertain.

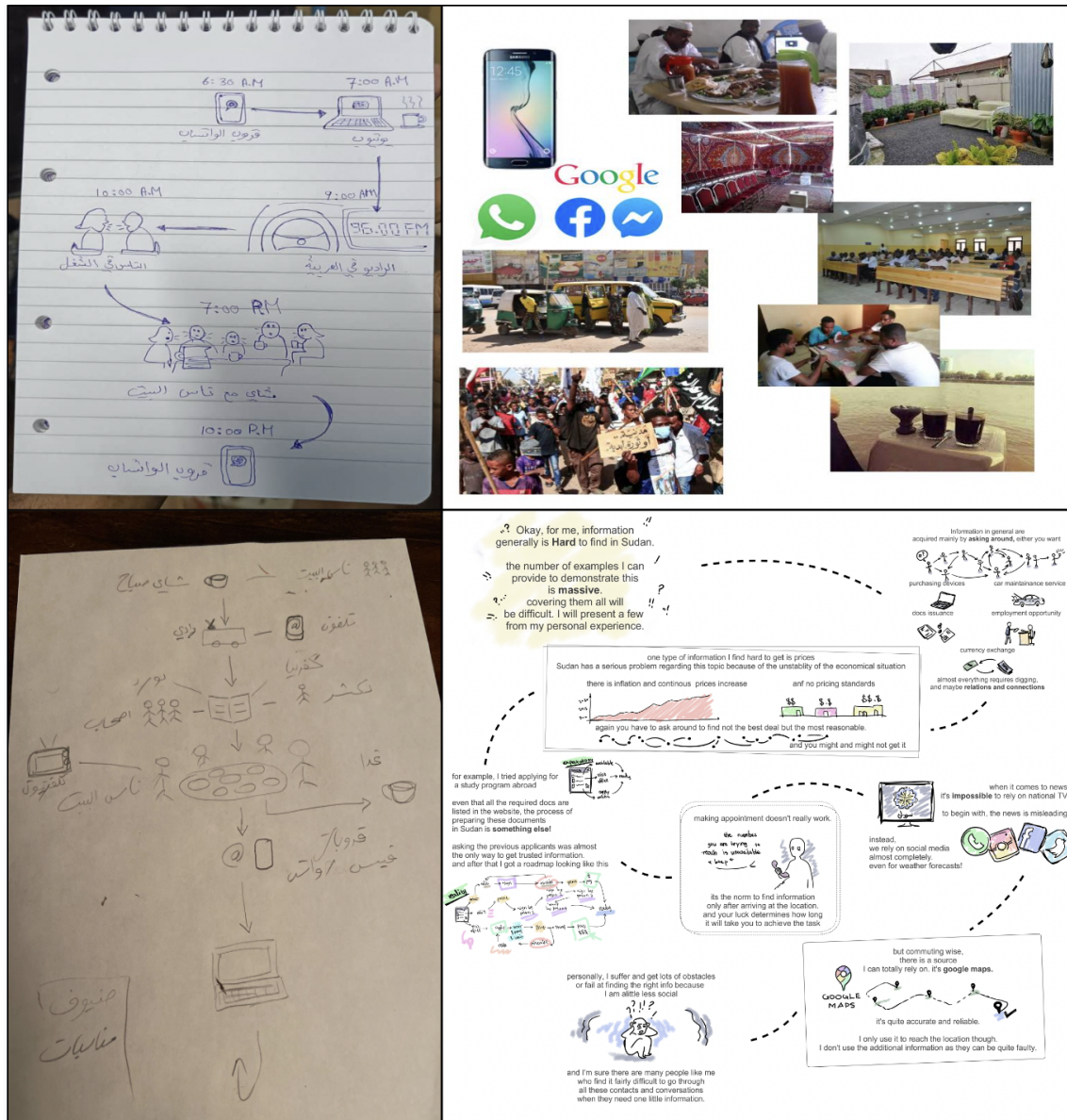
Mohammed echoed the point about rumors but noted that they could be “intentionally spread” by both the regime in power and the opposition to achieve their respective aims.

As we will see in the following sections, young people’s awareness of the biased nature of official information critically impacts their media consumption preferences. Specifically, the youth preferred to get their news and information from interpersonal sources and digital platforms, which were seen as more authentic and trustworthy.

#### ***Teatime Media Literacy: Interpersonal Communication as a Vital Source of Information***

Our analysis overwhelmingly pointed to interpersonal communication as a crucial source of information in the lives of urban Sudanese youth: Participants identified family and friends as a preferred informational resource for both news and other useful information. Many interviewees framed these dynamics in cultural terms, speaking of the significance and pervasiveness of interpersonal communication in Sudanese culture—both traditionally (as a culture rooted in oral traditions) and contemporarily (Ali: “Each person you meet is carrying a piece of information, and they will give it to you no matter what”). Participants’ maps were a striking illustration of the centrality of interpersonal communication in youths’ everyday information landscapes. Furthermore, maps significantly showed these interpersonal information-seeking and information-sharing practices as embedded in specific cultural contexts, from meals and tea times at home to school, public transportation, sports activities, and religious settings like Friday prayer.



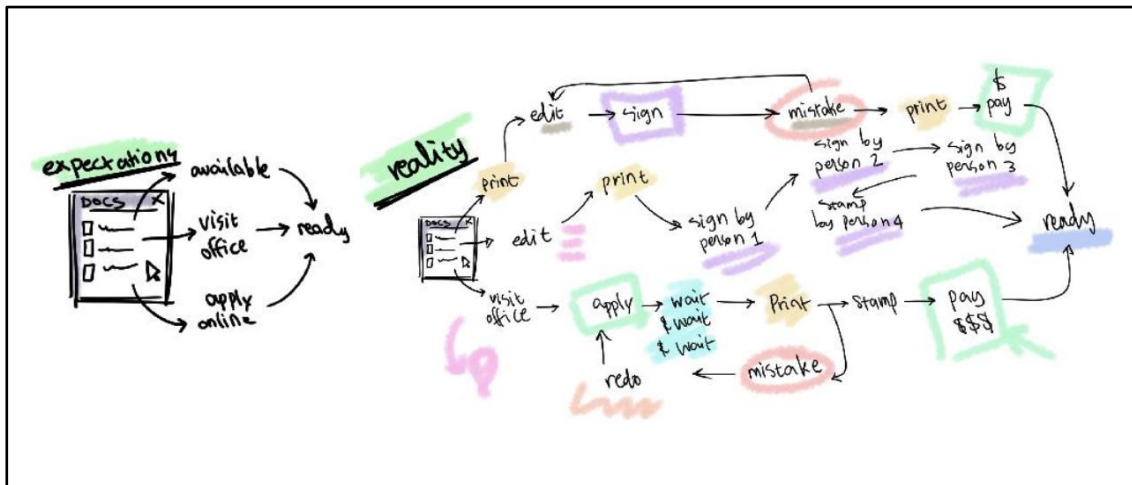


**Figure 1. A selection of participants' maps showing the significance of interpersonal sources. From the top left: (1) Ali's map depicting how, in his interpersonal encounters throughout the day, "each [person] is 'carrying' a piece of info and will give it to you no matter what." (2) Adil's map, made up almost entirely of interpersonal sources nested in cultural and religious settings, such as the mosque or teatime; (3) Nawal's map, where family meals are literally the center of her information landscape; (4) Moneera's map, showing interpersonal sources as the first stop in seeking out information.**

Interpersonal sources were seen as having distinct advantages as informational resources. First, they were perceived as comparatively more valuable, holding unique knowledge that one could not get from other media or information sources. As put by Zain, "When I'm looking for information, I always prefer to call someone... That person will shorten the road for me [and] would better understand me and my needs." Other participants added:

Whenever I wanna get to some location, it's easier when someone just tells me how to get there compared with using Google Maps for instance. Google Maps cannot give you everything, there is some info that is rather tacit, subtle. (Hamid)

[When applying to schools] you can't just trust the details on the website or by calling. The phone is most likely unanswered and the website is outdated. You have to get the most recent information from someone. Other media won't work. (Moneera)



**Figure 2. Moneera's map used a pair of flowcharts to illustrate expectations versus reality when it comes to applying for schools. The expectation would be to find this information easily on official websites or by phone. In reality, this process requires heavy reliance on informal interpersonal sources.**

Second, interpersonal sources were also seen as more trustworthy than media sources, given the prevalence of propaganda and misinformation in the latter. Rayyan expressed a sentiment shared by a number of participants, noting that they found it easier to assess credibility when it came from interpersonal sources:

It's just about the human connection... It's easier to measure to what extent what they're saying is true. What's written in the newspaper, there's no interaction. . . so you won't really be able to tell whether it's true. But it's easier to evaluate someone's interaction, body language, tone of voice, etc.

Furthermore, family and friends could be held accountable for what they said (the implication being, "unlike the media"), which further boosted the perceived credibility of interpersonal sources in the eyes of our participants. As Rayyan explained, "to share something is a responsibility":

Family and friends are most reliable. Hmm, I think it's a matter of accountability. The person will be around you and will be held responsible for what they say. . . So if I read something on Facebook and I really doubt it, but then I hear it from Ahmed [a close friend], even if it's not in Ahmed's field, it takes a lot for him to say it. I put more weight on it.

Similarly, as highlighted by multiple participants in their interviews, two important variables that condition young people's reliance on interpersonal sources are the source's perceived connection to the news or information (the more direct a connection, the better) and the information seeker's previous experience with the source (how much trust has been built between them). Ali gave an example of the former: "If someone brings you news from Darfur, and I know that they used to work with people from there, it makes me more trusting of what they are saying." Similarly, the latter variable was further explained by Zain:

When talking about word-of-mouth, there's two categories of information. There's people who I have already built trust with, close people. Those, I don't really verify most of what they say. . . . For the other category, people who aren't close, I trust what they say much less until I build trust with them.

Indeed, close, trusted friends and family were seen not only as reliable sources of information but also as important media literacy resources, helping young people assess the credibility of information in other contexts as well. As in Mohammed's quote above, several participants mentioned consulting trusted friends to verify information. For instance, Zain described how friends help him determine the credibility of political news, while Nawal said that only close friends can "convince" her that the content she receives on social media is indeed true.

### ***"We Have Our Own Version of Google Maps Here Just for the Blockades": The Salience of Digital Platforms in Youths' Information Landscapes***

While interpersonal communication was discussed as a vital information source in Sudan, the youth's information landscapes were uniquely marked by a reliance on digital platforms in addition to interpersonal communication. For youth, relying on digital platforms was considered both a necessity (for getting information quickly and enabling them to navigate everyday life under conditions of precarity) and a conscious choice (for having more agency and getting more authentic information).

In terms of the former, most participants' maps included social media (primarily Facebook and WhatsApp) and digital tools (especially Google Maps) as important resources for navigating everyday life under precarity. As the interviews further clarified, these platforms were particularly valuable for keeping up with the latest blockades and demonstrations:

Whenever there's a demonstration, and I'm not in the demonstration myself, regardless of how busy I am, I keep an eye on social media all day to get to know about the number of martyrs or those who got injured, and how successful the protest was. (Zain)

When there's a demonstration or something, people become smart at using Google Maps, like, for instance, they open the app in "traffic mode" not to look at the traffic, but rather to find out about a demonstration or a barricade when the road appears in red. (Moneera)

As summed up by Musa, "I feel like we have our own version of Google Maps here just for the blockades [laughs]. You gotta know where they are before you move around."

But beyond demonstrations, too, digital platforms—especially Facebook and WhatsApp—were seen as go-to places for quickly sharing and receiving information relevant to daily life. Many participants mentioned "useful groups" on Facebook or WhatsApp, where they could go to ask for information, such as the current exchange rate of the USD, traffic police stops and radars, or the latest robberies of the infamous Long Nine gang. Such interactions further illustrate the significance of interpersonal sources in Sudanese information landscapes, albeit in a digital, mediated context.

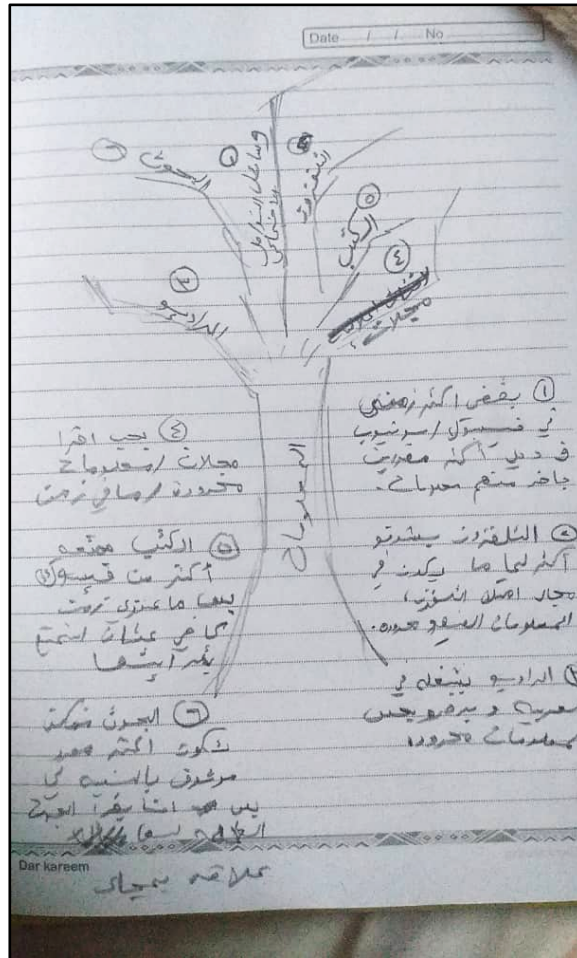
Indeed, for youth, social media was deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life and even supported their educational or professional endeavors. As Rayyan put it,

Our generation is more used to considering Facebook a "serious" place—like, it was the place where I got the results after exams, where I get notified if there's an emergency at school or something. So we look at it as something connected to the real world, a perception that maybe [our parents] don't have?

Compared to "funky websites that waste all your data" (Moneera), social media is also considered comparatively "affordable"—especially Facebook, whose popular Facebook Lite and Facebook Zero initiatives facilitate browsing with low or, respectively, zero data charges.

In contrast to other media, such as radio or TV—which participants often brought up as their parents' preferred information sources—social media provided youth with a sense of agency and control in addition to relevance. Rawan, whose map showed social media as the most prominent source of information, explained:

I never resort to TV or radio unless I don't have access to Facebook or YouTube. On TV and on radio, you are forced to watch or listen. But on Facebook, for instance, I can actually search for what I want. Something tailored to me. I feel I have a hand in things.



**Figure 3. Rawan illustrated her information landscape as a tree, centering on "social media platforms" as the main branch and adding that she spends most of her time on them in her explanation below. She described the amount of information in other branches (e.g., television, radio, magazines) as "limited." Later in the interview, she mentioned interpersonal communication as her second most used source. "I thought by information sources you mean only artifacts." She interestingly explained why interpersonal sources were absent from the map.**

Furthermore, the youth felt that television and radio were controlled by the political regime—either directly by shaping the content of broadcasts or indirectly by appointing employees based on ideology or nepotism. In contrast, social media were seen as more authentic sources, free(r) from the government manipulation.

However, even on social media, some youth are wary of manipulation and misinformation. Zain, for instance, complained about not "having the time to verify everything" on social media due to the huge influx of misinformation and rumors, which he expected during the transitional period. Similarly, Yusra noted the "huge ratio of misinformation" on social media due to "the situation in Sudan that

requires double-check everything.” Participants also mentioned talking to their parents about media literacy on social media and cautioning them against sharing misinformation from WhatsApp or Facebook groups. However, as Samreen and Nawal both shared, these discussions were sometimes stifled by the aforementioned “ego” or resistance by the parents. In Nawal’s words, “It’s the last thing in the world for your dad to admit they’re wrong about something.”

### ***“I Feel Like an Antenna”: Gender as a Limiting Factor on Movement and Information***

While the findings presented so far speak to common experiences and perceptions among urban Sudanese youth (though they are also defined by specific socioeconomic and cultural parameters, as we address in the discussion section below), it is important to note that not all information landscapes looked the same. Gender, in particular, emerged as a key variable that expanded or, conversely, shrunk youths’ information landscapes.

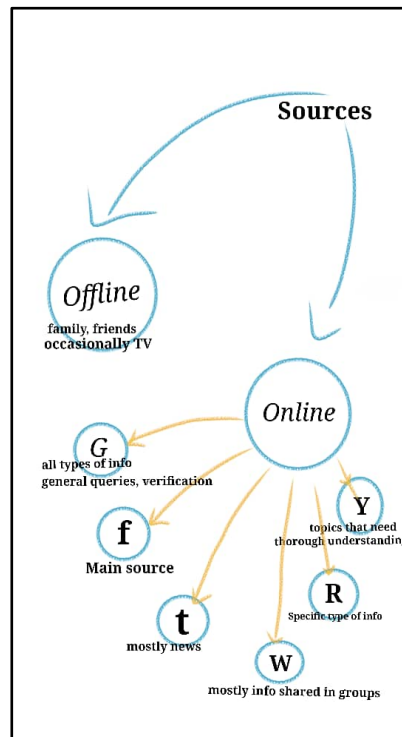
All female participants in our study discussed how being a woman in Sudan limited their movement and how less movement meant less exposure to information, effectively reducing the scope of their information landscapes. Indeed, this was a common refrain in both the map and post-mapping interviews:

There’s a huge limitation over here. Like, there are certain times that I cannot be out and/or certain places I cannot go to. For safety and cultural reasons maybe. So my exposure to those places and those times are secondhand, through someone else. And I wouldn’t know that I don’t know unless someone tells me about it. (Samreen)

There’s definitely a gender divide. . . In order to get information you have to be involved in the world. Women here have limitations on their involvement. . . . A Sudanese man is more exposed to the world, and always able to collect more information. (Rayyan)

Using a powerful metaphor that speaks to her immobility, Moneera, a graphic designer who worked from home, confessed that she “feel[s] like an antenna, trying to acquire as much information as possible about anything I encounter. I do not have much exposure to the outside world.” This perception also shaped how the women in our study considered themselves (or not) as sources of information. Indeed, Moneera followed up by saying she does not consider herself a source precisely because of her lack of mobility and access: “If I were someone who would always be outside and on the move, I would consider myself a source. But I don’t really move a lot.” This is in stark contrast to the male participants in our study, whose maps and interviews spoke to the many encounters with news and information that they experienced throughout the day and who strongly perceived themselves as information sources (e.g., Zain saw himself as an information “missionary” whose duty it was to share what he knew).

In practice, due to these limitations on movement, female participants mentioned getting most of their news and information online.



**Figure 4. Samreen's map depicted her heavy reliance on online sources versus offline ones. Elaborating on her map, she noted that she gets "80–85%" of her information online. "I wanted to say 95%, but I remembered very insightful offline conversations with people and I have to account for those too."**

However, as several female participants noted, this reliance on online platforms also has important shortcomings and cannot replicate the fullness and accuracy of the information that characterizes men's information landscapes:

Because I'm less social, I'm at a disadvantage. . . . I rely on the Internet for that reason, like, Google Maps for instance. But the thing is, it wouldn't be accurate. It wouldn't really tell you much about shop opening hours, for instance, like the info that guys have. (Moneera)

These are also the types of information that people do not talk about publicly on these [social media] platforms. So I always feel like I'm missing out on something because of this limitation, limitation on exposure. (Samreen)

Indeed, in the context of political and economic precarity, where getting up-to-date information quickly is a necessity for navigating daily life, these gender-based limits to information exposure can have very real consequences—and, as Moneera aptly put it, place women at a (further) disadvantage.

## Discussion

Using participatory mapping and follow-up interviews, this study investigates the informational sources and practices of urban Sudanese youth as they navigate their day-to-day information landscapes. Our findings show that these landscapes are highly shaped by the country's political context, which (1) promotes a sense of urgency in obtaining this information quickly to keep pace with rapidly changing conditions of political and economic precarity, and (2) amplifies the need for authentic, trustworthy information that eschews governmental manipulation. In addition, our analysis shows that this focus on usefulness and authenticity leads young people to rely predominantly on interpersonal sources and digital platforms while minimizing or avoiding exposure to mainstream media. Significantly, our work also highlights gender-based differences in urban Sudanese youths' information landscapes, as female participants conveyed a keen sense of awareness and discontent with their limited exposure to information sources.

This research contributes valuably to expanding the cultural and geographic focus of media literacy research and communication studies more broadly. Illuminating the underexplored context of Sudan, our study showcases the specifics of information seeking and media use as a necessary foundation for a culturally relevant approach to media literacy (Bozdağ et al., 2022; Melki, 2015, 2018; Melki & Maaliki, 2013; Seuferling et al., 2023). Below, we highlight a few of these particularities and the potential implications they hold for the design and implementation of media literacy initiatives in the region.

A key takeaway of this research concerns how Sudan's prolonged and deeply entrenched state of political and economic instability—what Melki (2018) called “the normality of the abnormal”—shapes young people's information practices (p. 5). The accelerated pace of information seeking and information sharing was common across participants' responses, particularly concerning learning about the fluctuating exchange rate of the US dollar against the Sudanese pound, the unpredictable demonstrations and road blockades, or the availability of basic products like bread or gas. Furthermore, because of the need to not only obtain information quickly but also *assess* credibility quickly, many participants talked about relying mostly on their intuition in evaluating information. While reliance on intuition is not a novel finding in media literacy research, the stakes here are higher: in this precarious context, the consequences of *not* being able to acquire and assess information in a timely manner have a direct impact on Sudanese people's livelihood and well-being.

In this sense, for urban Sudanese youth, media literacy, rather than an abstract concept, is intimately connected to daily life. This framing calls for a deeper emphasis on personal relevance in media literacy education rather than approaching it as a fixed set of abstract competencies. As Chambers et al. (2022) argue, the most successful media literacy initiatives align with people's specific concerns and values. In Sudan and the larger SWANA region, this means designing media literacy programs that are rooted in local experiences and needs, as seen with the Diraya Initiative (Seuferling et al., 2023), and realizing the importance that people place on certain outcomes of media literacy (Chambers et al., 2022).

The insights shared by the young people in this study also highlight the psychological toll of news consumption under conditions of political intensity. Our participants felt overwhelmed by “depressing” news,



especially on social media, and expressed a need to disconnect and avoid news altogether. While the phenomenon of news avoidance has been fruitfully addressed in previous research (see Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, for a review of recent studies), our findings question how media literacy initiatives should address the psychological impact of media consumption in such precarious, politically intense contexts. Furthermore, while media literacy is commonly concerned with the ability to access (see, e.g., Aufderheide, 1993), what happens when audiences choose *not* to access or when *not* accessing is in the interest of one's mental well-being?

Similarly, the intense political scene manifested in social movement media against propaganda might also present an opportunity to be leveraged in terms of media literacy conversations (King, 2021). However, although the youth participants in this study were very mindful of how the regime used media outlets to spread disinformation and propagandistic messages, they noted that their parents and older relatives were not. Despite the occasional tensions mentioned in our interviews, our findings show that intergenerational conversations about media present a valuable opportunity for media literacy education. All of our participants lived with their families in large households, and it was not uncommon to stay in the same household after marriage. Meals and tea times, often brought up in the participatory maps and interviews, were also important settings where Sudanese families gathered and often watched television together. A better understanding of these practices and settings is crucial for identifying opportunities for effective, culturally responsive media literacy education that might not only target young people but also engage them to reach older generations.

Indeed, our research revealed another key particularity of the Sudanese context: the significance of interpersonal sources in Sudanese information landscapes. Echoing Melki's (2015) findings about the centrality of word-of-mouth in SWANA youths' information landscapes, we found that family, friends, and acquaintances were highly salient in our study, occasionally serving as the "first point of contact in seeking and verifying information," as expressed by Zain. This emphasizes the need for a culturally grounded approach to media literacy education that is mindful of what young people recognize as important information sources in various settings (Melki, 2015)—and what youth perceive as "information" and "sources" to begin with. For instance, the youth in our study had very different understandings of "information," including whether they consider themselves an information source; these perceptions certainly inform their media literacy practices and shape whether or when they think critically about information received or shared.

Finally, our findings point to the significance of gender as a major factor in shaping urban Sudanese youths' information landscapes. Bringing up cultural and religious constraints, the female participants in our study were cognizant of how these restrictions limited their exposure to information, only allowing them to interact with some media in a "secondhand" manner. Indeed, in the context of political and economic precarity, this has significant implications for young Sudanese women's livelihoods and independence. Access to information is a major challenge facing women in developing countries (Primo, 2003), exacerbating gender inequality. While gender has often been addressed in media literacy education as a topic of inquiry (e.g., Puchner, Markowitz, & Hedley, 2015), media literacy campaigns in conservative contexts like Sudan need to be driven by a deep understanding of gender

dynamics and create targeted interventions that are both empowering to women and feasible within their everyday information landscapes.

### **Methodological Considerations and Directions for Future Research**

The participatory mapping technique used in our study elicited rich visual artifacts that showed how youth imagined their information landscapes and how they positioned themselves in relation to different information sources and practices. In particular, this latter demonstration of relational aspects would otherwise have been difficult to attain through other methods. The mapping activity allowed participants to deliberate as they produced their maps, unlike in interviews or focus groups, where an "instantaneous response is expected" (Literat, 2013, p. 210). It also promoted a sense of ownership and agency that was evident in youth accounts of their landscapes. The maps also served as an important reference point in conducting the follow-up interviews, anchoring the conversation, and deepening the insights obtained from participants' verbal responses (Sonnenwald et al., 2001).

Despite the aforementioned benefits, participatory mapping also had shortcomings when used with Sudanese youth in this context. A few participants reported initial confusion and unfamiliarity with the mapping process, often related to the use of the word "map" itself in the instructions. In fact, multiple participants suggested changing the word to "chart" or "drawing." Moreover, two participants felt self-conscious about their drawing skills, and it is possible that this might have affected how fully they engaged with the mapping process. To preempt this, we suggest reassuring participants that maps can be very simple, take any form they prefer, and include text as well. Additionally, it might be useful to substitute or complement the written instruction sheet with informal voice or video recordings as per participants' preferred modes of engagement; in our study, a couple of participants retroactively suggested the option of WhatsApp voice notes for the instructions instead or in addition to the written sheet.

While this study highlights several ways that Sudan's economic situation affects youth information landscapes and practices, it is important to note that our participants self-identified as middle class, lived in urban settings, and were highly educated compared with the general public. These characteristics of the sample might have shaped our findings, given that socioeconomic status and geographical background are determinants of levels of media literacy, as shown by a study on college students in the neighboring country of Ethiopia (Atinafu, 2021). Future research should foreground and embrace grassroots media practices of youth populations from rural areas and lower socioeconomic status, while being mindful of the epistemological bias that universalist (media literacy) frameworks and research methods carry toward certain ways of knowing and thinking (Milan & Trere, 2019).

Nonetheless, regarding financial aspects, participants discussed how they try to "minimize their data consumption" and avoid "websites that waste Internet plans." To ensure equitable access, digital media literacy campaigns should be aware of such considerations. While a solution can ostensibly be designing online educational campaigns on affordable platforms like Facebook Zero or Lite, this runs the risk of further obscuring the roots of the digital divide and the need for global policy reforms to ensure equity of access instead of makeshift solutions (Milan, 2021).

Essentially, Facebook as a platform and initiatives, such as Facebook Zero and Lite, need to be approached critically when discussing access. Although a number of youth in our study highlighted their reliance on Facebook as an affordable source of information (or to live stream in emergencies), it is also important to note how the American company was also responsible for censoring Arabic content—especially during conflict, limiting Arab users’ access, an issue that is often uncritically addressed in the Arab Spring literature (see King, 2021). Furthermore, while it is undisclosed how many appeals were granted, Facebook has received tens of requests from the current Sudanese governing body to shut down or reveal information about Sudanese users’ accounts (Facebook Transparency Center, 2023). All these incidents raise important questions about the political involvement of the platform in limiting access.

In conclusion, by offering authentic accounts of how a specific youth population in the SWANA region imagines and navigates their information landscapes, we hope that this article contributes toward challenging the Western-centric, universalist focus of media literacy by stressing how preferred media practices (and how knowing and thinking) are context-dependent and shaped by local ideals and struggles (Milan & Trere, 2019; Schmoll, 2021). At the same time, while calling for more scholarship on non-Western contexts, we urge scholars and practitioners to prioritize contextual specificity to avoid melding “non-Western” research into reductive boxes, such as “the African context” or even more broadly (and potentially more problematically; see Milan & Trere, 2019), “the Global South.”

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