



MEDIA LITERACY IN MACEDONIA: THE MISSING LINK FOR ACTIVE CITIZENRY

This research is conducted within the project 'Media Literacy in an Age of News Overabundance: Establishing Media Literacy Coalition', funded by the European Union

RESEARCH EXCERPT

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ACTIVE CITIZENRY

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I.

INTRODUCTION

The research report titled *Media Literacy in Macedonia: the Missing Link for Active Citizenry* is a pioneer undertaking to map out the state of media literacy in the country. It aims to fill the gap in academic and applied research about the topic, despite the practices and recommendations of the European Commission and UNESCO, which have increased in intensity over the last decade.

The goal of this research is to emphasize the importance of media literacy, which should be recognized not only by the citizens but also by the authorities, so that it may be incorporated and promoted in all spheres of society. The analysis contains an explanation of the term media literacy, not only from a traditional perspective – how the citizens are expected to manage the abundance of information and perceive them critically, but it also includes a contemporary understanding of this concept – using the media as a means for active citizenship.

The research focuses on three segments: 1. Media literacy within the Macedonian secondary education, 2. Media literacy and the civic sector in the country, and 3. Media literacy and the media. This approach to research is due to the need to answer the questions – to what extent and how media

literacy is practiced in the educational process, how much and how do the media understand and promote media literacy and how much and in what way civil organizations recognize the concept of media literacy as a prerequisite for education and encouraging active participation by the citizens. The report also provides an analysis on the normative and legal regulation of media literacy in the country, first and foremost through the prism of the Directive for Audio and Audiovisual Services of the European Commission and on the domestic Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

The findings from this research will help set the goals of the forthcoming networking of civil organizations and the media, which will act as a *Media Literacy Coalition* and will implement various initiatives based on the fundamental principles in this sphere: access, analysis, evaluation of media contents, as well as creating clear, visible and powerful information by the citizens themselves, through which they will be able to instigate changes in society.

The research is implemented as part of the **'Media Literacy in the Era of News Overabundance: Establishing a Media Literacy and Information Literacy Coalition'**, which is financed by the European Union.

II.

CONCLUSION

ON MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy has long been recognized as very significant for the development of democracy. It is a prerequisite for citizens' participation in societal processes, and for the protection of consumers of media, especially the vulnerable groups, such as children and young people, as well as for bridging the digital gap. It is a basic skill both for young people and adults, as well as for parents, teachers and media professionals in the modern information communication environment.

Since the 1980s, primarily owing to UNESCO's activities, media literacy has become an integral part of education (since the development of educational plans and curricula), and in the last two decades it has been given increased importance in media policies and media regulations. Of special importance are the numerous documents (resolutions, recommendations) of the Council of Europe and the institutions of the European Union, in which media literacy is primarily linked to exercising the right to freedom of expression and the protection of media consumers. Nonetheless, in accordance with the latest trends in media literacy development, the focal point is shifting from protecting media consumers to encouraging an active behavior of citizens and their participation in the communication on one hand, as well as the shift of the focal point from traditional media (print, radio, television) to new media and information technologies (internet), on the other hand.

Media literacy today is essential for an 'active and complete civic sector', to prevent and reduce the risk of exclusion from life (social and economic flows) in the community. What is more, as it is pointed out in the recommendations of the European Commission on Media Literacy in Digital Society (2009), a 'media literate society is at the same time a stimulant and a prerequisite for pluralism and independence of the media, for voicing different opinions and ideas, in different languages that represent different groups, and in society it is a positive influence on the values concerning diversity, tolerance, transparency, equality and dialogue.'

In line with this, starting from the fact that media literacy is one of the fundamental competencies required for the development of the individual and of society overall, the states have the obligation to continuously work on its improvement by active involvement and

collaboration in these processes from different actors, such as competent state authorities (ministries, agencies, regulation bodies) in the sphere of education, culture, media, the ICT sector, media industry, and by all means civic organizations.

MEDIA LITERACY IN MACEDONIA

Media literacy in the Republic of Macedonia is an almost unknown category and very little has been done so far for its promotion and implementation. The first (modest) steps were made in the field of media, with the enactment of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Services (December 2013), when 'institutionally' the term media literacy was noted for the first time, however without defining its meaning. Nevertheless, a few years before that (2009-2011) the non-governmental sector has dealt with the issue (the Macedonian Institute for Media), by conducting a research; drafting a special guidebook for teachers for teaching media literacy (in primary and secondary schools); organizing trainings for teachers and creating a special website dedicated to exchanging experiences, information and knowledge from the field of media literacy. It is precisely due to these activities that the Republic of Macedonia, viewed in a regional context (out of the former Yugoslav countries), obtained the 'status' of a country that has achieved significant progress in promoting the concept of media literacy and in terms of the presence of media education in the educational system.

Today, almost ten years after those 'modest' attempts to promote media literacy in the Republic of Macedonia, it is still at its starting point, despite all of the recommendations and resolutions coming primarily from the European Union and the Council of Europe. The empirical information obtained from the research activities conducted in several spheres of society point to this.

First and foremost, in **Macedonian legislation**, the only segment that contains a normative regulation of media literacy is the media sphere, however without providing a clear definition of it. In the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, there are merely assignments of the competences of the regulatory body – the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services for promoting media literacy and the duties of the public broadcasting service – the Macedonian Radio Television (MRT) to create and broadcast programmes that refer to encouraging media literacy. Self-regu-

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lation also plays a role in the media sphere, primarily the Media Ethics Council, as a mediator between the citizens and the media for protecting the interests of the citizens from unprofessional journalism, and with the goal of raising the awareness of the public for the professional and ethical standards that the media should comply with. In other segments – education; information society, media literacy is not treated at all, and the importance of ‘digital’ and ‘information’ literacy is underlined, however they too are not clearly defined.

In the field of **education**, there is no document – law, strategy, educational development programme – that incorporates media literacy, despite the numerous reforms in the educational programmes and the study subjects and in their contents, in primary and in secondary schools alike. Hence, modern educational practices specifically point out the importance of using information-communication technology in the educational process as a long-term, continuous strategic move. In this context, ‘computer literacy’ is used as an essential part of the competences both for young people and adults, and as a condition for their inclusion in the workforce and in social-political life; or ‘digital literacy’ is said to be necessary for reducing the digital gap and creating an inclusive information society for all citizens. This specifically results in many projects for digitizing the educational process through computerization, introducing internet in the schools in Macedonia, new study subjects and curricula.

The teachers also only partially recognize the importance of media literacy and they integrate it within ‘language literacy of the media and media contents’. Secondary school students, on the other hand, most often relate media literacy to the media and their work and they define it as ‘awareness about current events’, ‘media culture’, ‘ability to tell apart the truth by becoming informed through several media outlets’, ‘awareness of the importance of media’, ‘ability of the media to communicate correct and reliable information’.

Formal education nearly closes its doors for media literacy and instead operates with the concept of ‘media culture’, which can be found in the contents of several study subjects (Sociology, Civil Education, Information Science), and primarily in the study subjects of the mother language and literature, however with a small number of lessons as part of it (they concern the role of mass media in

democracy, media globalization, the development and functioning of the internet). Here elective project activities are also included (such as literary clubs, drama sections, photography and design sections, etc.) and extra-curricular activities that serve as a way for individual interests to be met as well as the wishes of the students in various fields. However, it seems that, it is precisely these extra-curricular activities, which are neither credited nor evaluated, have an increasing impact on the process of educating about media literacy. This is the standpoint of the civil sector too, mostly because of the inertness of formal education in accepting and adapting to modern societal occurrences. For secondary school students this is an excellent ‘model’ that requires dedication and time, however it is insufficiently motivating because of the activities required by regular lessons. For the teachers it is an additional personal effort, more hours spent after classes and during weekends.

Of course, with the computerization of schools and the use of internet in the teaching process, the legal requirement (Law on Secondary Education) for mandatory use of information-communication technologies in the schools (computers, LCD projectors, smart boards, etc.) implementing the educational process is ‘met’ for. However, due to the inadequate technical conditions of the schools, and because of the ‘belated’ trainings and seminars for the teachers on what ICT use in education implies, the process is difficult to sustain and it provides no specific benefits. Although, it is precisely the use of information technology that drives up the need for integrating contents for media literacy in the educational programmes.

As opposed to that, it appears that the **media sphere** is the only one in which media literacy has specific and ‘recognizable’ labels. The fact that the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services has the legally assigned ‘task’ of promoter of media literacy, the media, and especially the Macedonian Radio-Television are placed in the ‘role’ of specific ‘implementers’ of programmes that will help promote it.

AAVMS, whose obligation is stipulated with the Directive for Audio and Audiovisual Services of the EC, is late with the research for measuring the level of media literacy in the country. In this domain, the AAVMS has only determined the methodology according to which such a measurement would be performed; however they have not succeeded in

implementing it thus far. This results in a lack of basic official data on the real state of media literacy in the country.

What has been done so far is an adaptation of several videos about media literacy intended for children and adults (parents) for popularization of media literacy, i.e. the new media and technologies and efficient internet access controls, which the Agency recommended for electronic media to broadcast free of charge.

The media, on the other hand, do not have their internal policies or guidelines which, apart from the principles for professional informing, would help foresee activities and protocols for promoting media literacy of their employees, and especially of the citizens as competent media consumers. Nor will they have enough educational contents that will help the audience bridge the digital gap. This task was assigned to the public broadcasting service, whose programme structure does not overstep the 'boundaries' of the programme schemes that have been standardized a long time ago.

The media and journalists often confuse media literacy with 'language literacy' and 'journalistic skills'. However, they recognize the importance of interaction with the audience and apart for traditional forms of communication (such as letters from the readers, telephone calls, direct meetings), almost all channels include online communication (most often it is done via social networks Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), however without any standardized rules and task division. They are also open for visits from citizens in order to introduce them to the work of the media. Nonetheless these practices are sporadic and most often they are initiated by educational institutions (kindergartens, schools, faculties). Journalists are skeptical in terms of civil organizations and their capacity for successful communication and in terms of cooperating with the public and the media, mostly because they are not sufficiently familiar with the work of the media and they do not know how to attract the attention of journalists and with it the attention of the public. Perhaps that is the reason why they are represented 'as much as they are represented' in the media, although there is room for improvement of the cooperation.

As far as the **civil sector** is concerned, there aren't any nongovernmental organizations functioning in the Republic of Macedonia whose primary activity is the promotion and implementation of media literacy. More

specifically, two types of NGOs can be identified. One type integrates media literacy directly into their activities and they practice debates, forms of youth activism, creation and interpretation of media contents – as a process of educating young people and forming a critical stand towards topics and events, with the purpose of direct influence over the democratic processes in society. The other type, which cover topics that are of public interest, integrate media literacy in media campaigns, seminars, trainings, educational forums that they organize for raising the awareness of the citizens about social, ecological, health issues, especially of marginalized and vulnerable social categories. For the representatives of civil organizations, especially the ones promoting different aspects of media literacy, it implies 'skills and capabilities of the citizen for critical thinking', while for those representing differing social issues and groups, 'communication with the public', 'a way of presenting and promoting the activities from the field they represent', 'familiarizing with the media and their work'.

Careful monitoring of the activities of the civil sector shows their insistence, be it direct or indirect, to put media literacy on the agenda and keep the topic there. Some of them may even be considered as the lead implementers of the process of acquiring media literacy in the Republic of Macedonia, although the social context in which they operate does not always go in their favor. Thus, for the cooperation between the civil sector and the schools (whether it is from a technical, logistical or educational aspect) the competent ministry is the deciding authority, i.e. they decide which organizations and what programmes and activities can be undertaken. The media are also closed for cooperation, they are 'unprepared' to nurture a critical stand towards certain social issues that these organizations are raising, forgetting that it is precisely they that should be a bridge of connection between the NGOs and the citizens. Organizations themselves, however, especially the smaller ones believe that they could benefit from communication skills trainings and from new knowledge about new creative approaches for 'selling' their 'stories' to the media and the public.

If, on the other hand, one is to view the situation from the perspective of the subjects who are directly or indirectly involved in the processes and activities linked to media literacy, like for instance the persons coming from competent state authorities (ministries, regulatory

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bodies, agencies), secondary school students and teachers, civil organizations, media representatives, what is especially alarming is that practically no one is 'operating' with a clear and precise image of what media literacy is, let alone its role and importance in a democratic society. The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services is probably one of the rare institutions that (up until recently) organized workshops discussing the term and concept of media literacy for their counselors and experts' departments, which cannot be said for other competent authorities in the country.

Overall, it is an image that does not instill optimism. Plenty must be done to even be able to talk, first of all, about promoting media literacy, and only after that about advancing it in the Republic of Macedonia. This is a serious 'project' that requires involvement of all actors, the competent ministries, regulatory bodies, the media, up to civil organizations and it cannot be disregarded or delayed any further. Today, in the 21st century, media literacy, more than ever before, has become an integral part of everyday functioning of individuals and of society overall.

III.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Media literacy is a comprehensive process that cannot be implemented with one activity alone, nor can it be regulated with only one law. In the attempt to define the modalities necessary for promoting and advancing media literacy in the Republic of Macedonia, the best approach may be the development of a comprehensive STRATEGY for media literacy, as a systemic approach with continued and coordinated activities and a clear division of competences. In that regard, the following draft measures and activities may be placed in operation:

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Defining media literacy as a crucial competence and adequately integrating it in the strategic documents in the field of education and in the field of media.
- When developing a strategy for inclusion and promotion of media literacy in education and in the media, the focal point should be the component of critical understanding of media contents and the way in which media function, as well as on the importance of media literacy for active citizens.
- Encouraging public debates between the representatives of the competent state institutions, the educational sector, non-governmental organizations and the media industry, on the topic of the importance and the state of media literacy in the Republic of Macedonia.
- Promoting systematic research through studies and projects about various aspects and dimensions of media literacy in the digital environment. Regular monitoring (measuring) of the situation and the progress of the level media literacy has reached.
- Encouraging the competent institutions to organize campaigns for raising the awareness about the techniques used for commercial purposes, especially product placement, online advertising, in order for the citizens to get a better understanding of the border between marketing and contents.
- Encouraging and increasing the accessibility of the media and information and communication technologies on a local, regional and national level, so that more citizens can have access to the media and information and communication technol-

ogies, including the elderly, people with physical disabilities, people who are in a difficult economic-social situation.

- Providing information for all citizens for safe usage of the media and of information and communication technologies, with special attention to sensitive categories, such as children and young people.
- Developing and enabling cooperation with all relevant international institutions and organizations that are active in the field of media literacy, including UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR:

- Integrating teaching media in all segments of education, from pre-school to higher education, and adequately integrating it in adult education, in accordance with the needs of the participants in the educational processes.
- Organizing conferences and other public events for inclusion and development of media literacy in mandatory educational programmes, as well as providing key competences for life-long learning.
- Developing appropriate programme units for media education in mandatory teaching curricula and programmes for primary and secondary education. Developing teaching materials for media education.
- Additional training for the teaching staff about media education and about the new information and communication technologies.
- Developing dialogue between the educational institutions, parents, NGOs and the media industry about media education as part of the educational system.
- Organizing trainings, informative days and distributing information packages for raising the awareness, especially of young people, parents and teachers about the risks related to processing personal data through communication networks.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MEDIA SPHERE:

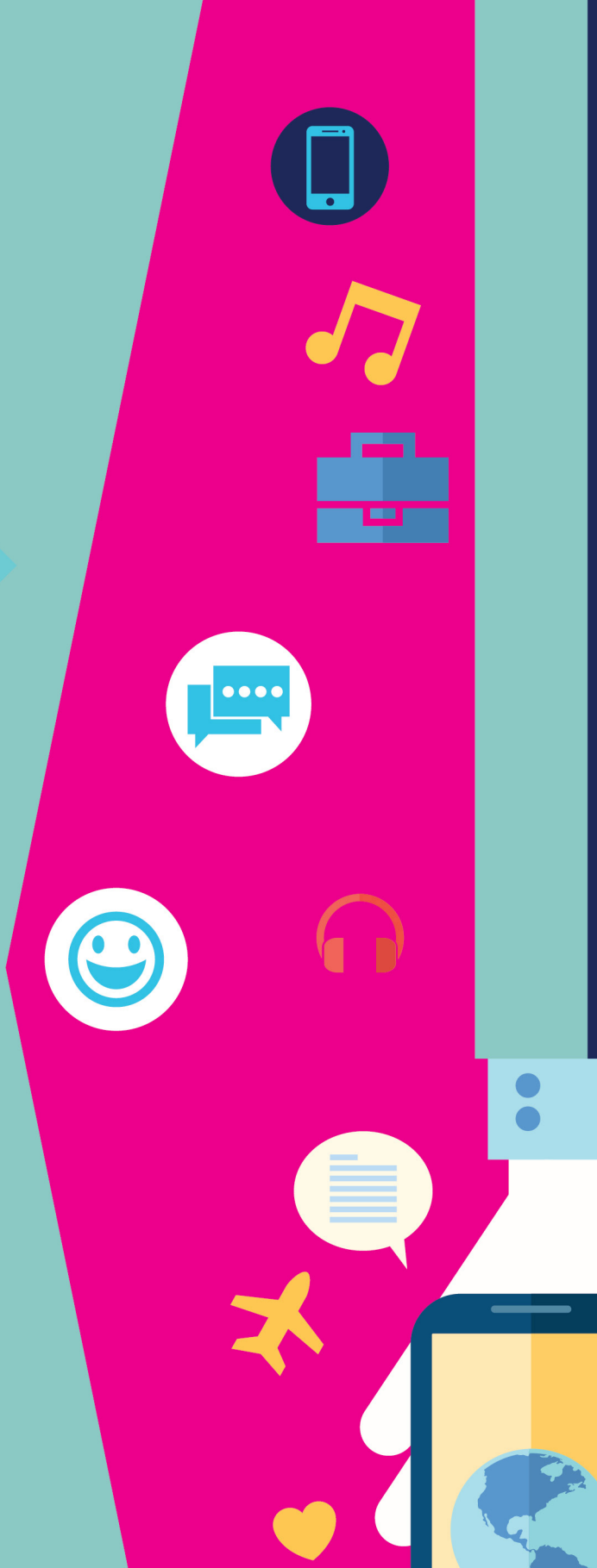
- Incorporating media literacy in media policy by becoming part of the laws and by-laws, as well as strategies in the field of media, with clear definitions of the objectives and the competences of each subject.

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- Clearly defining the role of public media (public broadcasting service) in promoting and advancing media literacy, protecting media pluralism and the quality of the media programmes.
- Encouraging the regulatory and self-regulatory bodies for the media to undertake continuous activities with the goal of promoting media literacy and familiarizing the public with the way in which media are regulated and self-regulated.
- Complementing the self-regulation professional journalistic codices with principles for promotion of media literacy. Training media professionals about media literacy and its importance.
- Encouraging the media to create educational resources that will help the citizens overcome the digital gap and be able to take maximum advantage of the benefits from using the new media.
- Strengthening the cooperation of the media with the civil organizations, which will result in a choice of programmes that focus on the citizen and allow pluralism of opinions and support for social changes.
- Encouraging the media industry to provide the necessary tools for improving the level of media literacy through systemic dissemination of the knowledge, through informative campaigns about producing, editing and distributing information and creative contents in the digital world.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL ORGANIZATIONS:

- Initiating positive changes in society, through activities that nourish the participative culture of the citizens by using the media: public events, debates, media contents created by and for citizens, organizing donations, petitions, social media, legislative initiatives, etc.
- Investing in education for strategic communicating, drafting clear guidelines and standards for efficient communication with the public, the authorities and the media, needed for successful implementation of civic initiatives.
- Enabling education and creating resources for the citizens to access information that concern them, obtaining knowledge for critical perception of media contents, skills for using new or traditional media for self-expression and successful communication with the public.
- Promoting the cooperation of the media with the civil organizations through joint initiatives or networking with the goal of encouraging active citizens, protecting public interest and good governance.



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