

Martina Gligorova

Media literacy: Need or necessity in the 21 century?

Abstract

The media play a key role in connecting people with other members of the community and society. They enable them to share common experiences and, through the process of mutual communication, to create a sense of belonging to common society. The advent of the Internet in the 1990s and its dynamic development in the first two decades of the XXI century drastically changed the structure of the media system. At the same time, the media in this post-modern world are the primary source of information for citizens about domestic and world developments. Consequently, as much as they are sources of information, on the other hand, they are a suitable ground for the development of “side-effect” phenomena in the media world, namely the spread of fake news, propaganda, and misinformation. Hence, the research question arises from the emerging need to prevent the rapid spread of these phenomena in order to raise the level of awareness of citizens. The main purpose of this paper is to emphasize the need for media education and the development of the skill set of the 21st century in the Republic of North Macedonia, including critical reading and understanding as one of the ways to detect new phenomena. European regulations and recommendations as well as the trend of UNESCO policy development have imposed the need to popularize this issue, which is undoubtedly complemented by the realization of citizens’ rights. The Republic of North Macedonia needs to revise the relevant legislation and perhaps provide a different perspective on media treatment, and formally include media and information literacy as an integral part of education programs from an early age.

Keywords:

Media and information literacy, (online) media, European regulations, media education

Introduction

The media and their purposeful performance of functions is important in the process of building a healthy democratic state with a strong pluralistic media system and educational system. The media as the main source of information for citizens and the public as a whole have a great responsibility for propounding the type of content, its importance, and its potential impact on society. As part of that responsibility, but also the role, is to connect people with other members of the community and society. They enable them to share common experiences and, through the process of mutual communication, create a sense of belonging to a common society.

The advent of the Internet in the 1990s and its dynamic development in the first two decades of the XXI century drastically changed the structure of the media system. Communication has gradually spread to the Internet, as an additional or complementary part of public communication. With the increase of various communication devices for internet access and with the reduction of the costs for internet connection, it started to occupy a central place in daily communication, and thus in the political communication of the citizens. As a result of the increasing use of online media and the development of communication platforms, phenomena or side effects such as fake news, propaganda, and misinformation have increased.

Therefore, the answer to the question is very important: How does the public recognize this news, and how does it deal with it? What tools are there to eradicate these phenomena and how states can help address them? The answer is simple - media literacy. According to the dominant theory, there is no unified definition of media literacy, but as a starting point, we will use the definition of the European Commission, which undoubtedly in accordance with the activities and priority of action plans, gives a central place in media policy. Hence, media literacy is "... the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content, and to communicate in a variety of contexts"¹.

In addition, media literacy refers to all types of media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies. It is important to emphasize that, although online media in many countries occupy a central place for informing the citizens, still in the Republic of North Macedonia according to the analysis of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services most citizens use traditional media (television and radio) as sources of information².

However, regardless of the different sources, the media in general are fertile ground for deviant media phenomena and the "cry" for urgent actualization of media literacy and education.

The European Union and the United Nations i.e., UNESCO, have long dealt with the issue of media education and the integration of media literacy into the curriculum. Germany first encountered theoretical publications on media literacy in the 1970s and 1980s, with a growing interest in media education in and out of the education system in the 1980s and 1990s. In this European country, the content of media literacy education is an important part of the curriculum and standards for different academic subjects and areas of learning³.

1 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, a European approach to media literacy in the digital environment, COM(2007) 833 final, Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 20.12.2007.

2 Data on radiostations reach, and the audience share of satellite, regional and local TV. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/>.

3 Tulodziecki G. & Grafe S. (2012). Journal of Media Literacy Education pp. 44 – 60.

Critical perception of the news is necessary to build strong and substantiated views and opinions. Media literacy is a basic level of acquisition of general skills in order to recognize visual symbols, computer work and other media resources. The Republic of North Macedonia has not joined the trend of European democracies in the process of integrating media literacy in educational programs. First, it is necessary to harmonize the relevant European directives with the domestic laws and to actualize the problem. Contrary to the ideas and activities undertaken within the European Union, to which the Republic of North Macedonia aspires and which in the function of that strategic goal has the obligation to adopt the European legislation in the Macedonian legislation, until 2014, the relevant political documents and legal acts neither in the field of media, nor in education or culture, do not seriously deal with media literacy.

Only a few strategic documents (national programs, strategies for development of the specific activity) indicate the need and necessity of promotion and development of media literacy as a missing tool for active citizenship. In fact, the first modest steps taken in the field of media were made through the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Services in December 2013. Today, the Republic of North Macedonia is in the initial phase in terms of full and consistent regulation of media literacy, despite all of the recommendations and resolutions that come primarily from the European Union and the Council of Europe⁴. Therefore, the absence of a media literacy nation and the increasing number of propaganda and fake news means an urgent need to introduce media literacy in education and to actualize the problem.

The main purpose of this research is to emphasize the need for media education and development of the skill set of the 21st century in Republic of North Macedonia, including the critical reading and understanding as one of the ways to detect new phenomena. Furthermore, the research should determine the relationship between the development of societies, digitalization and the emergence of new channels of information through which public communication takes place and the level of awareness and development of critical ability to evaluate content in democratic societies. By examining the theoretical and empirical studies, the paper should answer whether North Macedonia in particular has mechanisms for raising public awareness of media literacy as a tool for dealing with fake news and in general the side effects of the media system. How this is being regulated by the existing legal framework and are the strategic determinations and activities aimed at introducing media literacy in educational programs?

Of particular importance is online media, which substantially democratize public and political communication, and largely define the discourse of debate and the formation of public opinion.

Additionally, the purpose of this research is a theoretical and empirical examination of the process of formation and promotion of media literacy within the European Union, that North Macedonia aspires to access, and the specialized agency within the United Nations - UNESCO through diachronic perspective. For this, the research includes the most influential theories and studies in this field, related to communication studies, including the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas.

4 North Macedonia has been a member since the mid-nineties of the last century.

Online media

According to all relevant research and analysis, television is still the most important medium for informing the citizens, while online media are in second place according to their use for information, at least in the Republic of North Macedonia⁵. If we carefully analyze the data, we can see the discrepancy in the habits of informing the citizens according to age i.e., the tendencies of the older citizens to be informed through television, while the younger population groups are almost predominantly informed through the Internet and the new generations of Internet communication devices. The development dynamics of this process clearly indicate that in the foreseeable future the influence of online media will further increase, and the influence of television will stagnate or decline. The German theorist and sociologist Jürgen Habermas states that the media should be a public sphere, defining the public sphere as “a space where people can come together to discuss political issues openly and formulate certain political strategies” (Habermas, 2006). However, Habermas continues, by the end of the 19th century, the media had ceased to be a public sphere. Politicians have become too skilled at instrumentalizing the media in order to convey only their opinion and their interests.

The ownership of the media gradually began to be concentrated in the hands of smaller groups that saw the media only as a business i.e., as a platform for advertising and material gain. The press has lost its role in leading the quality and encouraging political debate, while readers from active citizens are transformed into potential consumers of the products and services advertised by the media. The development of the Internet has profoundly changed the functioning of the media and deepened the need to introduce mechanisms for dealing with media side effects and the need of developing a new set of skills.

The media play an important role in the political life of democratic societies and they should enable the public to be informed about important topics, as well as to provide a forum where different views and opinions can be expressed. However, there are many doubts about how well the media manage to meet these standards and expectations, and often the media are at the center of heated debates about their real responsibilities to the public. It is important to note that there is a conflict of interest and values between freedom of speech and corporate earnings principles. However, in reality, large companies dominate the media market and control the content that is circulating through the media. Manuel Castells perceives the media as a space for communicating ideas and activities that arise from society itself and are addressed to decision makers in the institutions of that society. Global civil society is an organized reflection of the values and interests of society.

According to S. Livingstone (Livingstone 2005: 12-13) The Internet and online media have four key features:

- a. New media shape society, and then, in turn, society influences them, creating the so-called “Hybridization of existing technologies and social processes”.
- b. New media and online platforms have a network structure, i.e. they represent a broad, multiplied connection in which many points (individuals, groups, databases, technological devices, etc.) are intertwined. In them, the communication structure has changed from “one to all” to “all to all”.

5 Data available at: <https://avmu.mk/>.

- c. Ubiquity - New media do not use everyone, but they still affect everyone. The incorporation of the Internet and modern technologies into the economy, banking, education, politics, and many others, directly or indirectly affects all levels of society.
- d. Interactivity i.e., new media enable search and selection of information, which is not possible with traditional media. Interactivity is a key feature that enables personalization as a factor in many other processes, including changes in how the public sphere works.

Promotion of media literacy and education in international organizations

Public institutions have a great role in the process of legitimizing media education, from the moment when their budget provides funds for the promotion of media in education, and international organizations, universal, in the UN-UNESCO system and regional, in the European context - the Council of Europe, each within its own mission - peace in the world by bringing nations together pioneering steps in this area i.e., bringing education programs, through numerous projects for respect for human rights, among others, and for literacy.

The functioning of each ministry, as a body that functions internally, at a national level, within each country separately is completely different from the work of international government organizations due to the position of power, pedagogical logic, more effective logic, but less innovative, generally through completely different rules of the game. All this in a function of necessary, demanded, expected innovations in many fields.

Most different programs (comparatively) recommend starting media education at the age of five. The child as a baby forms the image of the world/environment under the influence of many visual, sound, and tactile experiences. But starting at the age of five, school becomes a place of socialization. Audiovisual discovery and learning techniques seem to be extremely age-appropriate, which is interpreted as a “period of concrete operative action”, and the use of these techniques in children creates the ability to relate different types of views. In this direction, international organizations tend to encourage the introduction of the concept of media education integrated into the countries’ curricula in order to produce young people with an ability to critically observe and use the media information.

United Nations Media Literacy and Media Education Policy

UNESCO⁶, an acronym for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN), enshrined in the constitution signed on November 16, 1945. The constitution, which came into force in 1946, called for the promotion of international co-operation in education, science and culture. In addition to supporting educational and scientific programs, UNESCO is also involved in efforts to protect the common cultural heritage of the natural environment and humanity. For example, in 1972, an international agreement was sponsored to establish a List of World Heritage Sites and Natural Heritage Sites that would enjoy government protection.

6 The agency is headquartered in Paris, France.

UNESCO's initial focus was on rebuilding schools, libraries and museums that were destroyed in Europe during World War II. Since then, its activities have been largely facilitative, in order to assist, support and complement Member States' national efforts to eliminate illiteracy and to continue free education. UNESCO also seeks to encourage the free exchange of ideas and knowledge by organizing conferences and providing clearing and exchange services. As much less developed states joined the UN in the 1950s, UNESCO began devoting more resources to their problems, which included poverty, high illiteracy rates and underdevelopment.

The concept of media education became relevant in the 1960s at the international level in scientific circles, primarily the teams formed within UNESCO that were engaged in research on the problem of education.

This is the period when the power of television comes to the fore, which dramatically changes the social environment. In addition, education plays the primary role in the literacy of the masses to critically monitor the danger of manipulation.

Media education is the acquisition of the ability to critically read the media, all types of media (press, radio, TV, Internet, etc.). The aim is to reduce the distance from the media by understanding their functioning and being acquainted with their content, as well as by placing them in different perspectives in relation to the systems in which they are developed. Emphasizing the right of citizens to media education, UNESCO at the Conference on Media Education organized in Vienna back in 1999, stressed: "Media education is part of the fundamental right of every citizen of every country in the world and freedom of expression and the right to information is a tool for building and maintaining democracy". "We live in a world where media are omnipresent" - more and more people are spending a lot of time watching TV, reading newspapers and magazines, and listening to the radio.

According to a number of studies, in some countries, children spend more time watching television than attending school. All this points to the great influence of the media world on people's perception and understanding of social events. The modern world of advanced technology that is increasingly accessible to people of all ages must also mean increased awareness of all possible propaganda and spins behind every piece of news. Critical perception in the 21st century is a necessary element in the development of personality and correct reasoning.

It was this UN agency that in 1982, with the adoption of the Grünwald Declaration⁷, emphasized the need for media literacy. Media literacy is a human right that improves the quality of life of citizens. Assists in the process of eradicating poverty, population growth, the process of achieving gender equality and the process of ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.

In this postmodern world in which the Internet and traditional media are increasingly present in people's lives, to a large extent, our beliefs, perceptions and attitudes about the most everyday events, up to the events that play a big role in the future development of the world, depend on what the media places on us. People around the world are witnessing a dramatic increase in access to information and communication. While some people are hungry for information, others are flooded with print, broadcast, and digital content. But what is the quality of that information, how can we handle it, how can we access, search, critically evaluate, use and contribute content wisely, both online and offline, what are our rights online and offline, what are ethical questions about access to and use of information, the answer can be found with good knowledge of media and information literacy. One of the goals that every modern and democratic society strives to achieve is the creation of independent and pluralistic media and information systems.

7 Grünwald declaration on media education, 1982.

Available at: <https://milunesco.unaoc.org/mil-resources/grunwald-declaration-on-media-education/>.

UNESCO's mission is to foster a media and information literacy society through a comprehensive strategy that includes the preparation of a model curriculum for media and information literacy, the facilitation of international cooperation, the development of guidelines for the preparation of national policies and strategies for media and information literacy, the articulation of Global Media Framework for Media and Information Literacy, Establishment of Media and Information University Literacy Network, Articulation and Establishment of an International Media and Information Literacy Clearing House in Cooperation with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and Provision of Useful Guides for media and information literacy.

Citizens want information, but also want the answer on how to properly and critically deal with everyday information. They want to use new resources and new knowledge, want to use their fundamental and internationally guaranteed right to freedom of expression and active participation in management processes. In this regard, UNESCO has developed a Media and Information Literacy: Policy and Strategy Guidelines⁸. This is a very important document in defining the course of media and information literacy for the countries.

UNESCO calls on the states to create their policy and way of national development of media literacy separately, to gain sufficient information and level of development of the society, to collect valid and reliable data on the competencies of media and information literacy. In this direction, states must invest in developing a new set of critical competencies (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) for their citizens. It is the simple answer for the new information developments in the world and building healthy democratic states with educated citizens who can make the right decisions and have developed critical thinking skills.

For stronger emphasis, the UN has actualized the issue of media and information literacy in the 2030 UN Agenda. In meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) on the Agenda, this literacy is not directly observed, but is an essential and integrated part of several goals: SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, SDG 4 on Quality Education for All, and SDG 5 on Gender and Empowerment of Women and Girls.

European Union policy for the development of media literacy

At the very beginning, we defined that, in this research, the starting point / definition that will be used for the concept of media literacy is the definition of the European Commission. Why was this definition chosen? In the European integration i.e., entry into the European Union to which the Republic of North Macedonia aspires, it is important to follow the course of the Union policies. Hence, North Macedonia aims to meet the priorities set by the Union and open clusters in accordance with the new methodology for accession negotiations. The media and information society are part of the Competition and inclusive growth cluster, and the activities of the state are under constant monitoring and evaluation not only by the Commission, but also by other international organizations working in this area. From a legal point of view, what is crucial is the legal framework of the European Union, which also deals with media literacy.

8 Grizzle, Alton, Moore, Penny, Dezuanni, Michael, Wilson, Carolyn, Asthana, Sanjay, Banda, Fackson, Onumah, Chido, & Torras, Maria-Carme (2013), Media and Information Literacy, Policy and Strategy Guidelines. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002256/225606e.pdf>.

A key step in promoting media literacy is the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2007)⁹, one of the central instruments of European media policy. It explicitly defines media literacy as “the skill, knowledge and understanding that enables consumers to use the media effectively and safely”, and media literate citizens as individuals who are able to “make informed choices, to understand the nature of the content and services and to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by new communication technologies”. This is followed by the European approach to media literacy in the digital environment, with a detailed elaboration of all its aspects (definition, media literacy for commercial communication, audiovisual work, online). In 2009, the European Commission issued a Recommendation on Media Literacy emphasizing the role of Member States in cooperating with regulatory bodies for audio and audiovisual communication services and the media industry in promoting media literacy in society.

The European Charter for Media Literacy¹⁰ contains a definition that goes beyond the four components and adds other aspects such as the behavior of the public to avoid offensive or harmful content as well as the use of the media to practice citizens’ rights:

- use of media technologies in an effective way to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual needs and interests and the needs and interests of the community;
- gaining access to, and making informed decisions about, a wide range of media forms and content from a variety of cultural and institutional sources;
- understanding how and why media content is produced;
- critical analysis of the techniques, languages, and principles used by the media and the messages they convey;
- creative use of the media to express and convey ideas, communications, and opinions;
- identifying and avoiding or challenging media content and services that may be undesirable, offensive or harmful; and
- effective use of the media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities.

For the next few years, the focus is on striving to link media literacy to education i.e., to make it a mandatory part of the curriculum. Thereby, the academic and scientific public has a very active role in all these activities through a multidisciplinary research approach in the study of the phenomenon of media literacy. Numerous studies have been conducted on the ability of individuals (children, youth, adults, marginalized) to access, analyze and evaluate media content, their general IT skills and digital literacy skills in a social, cultural and political context¹¹. In 2007¹², the European Commission launched a survey of best practices at EU level and, based on the survey, presented its findings and suggestions in the Communication¹³. The research seeks public opinion on media literacy related to digital technologies and information on commercial, film and online initiatives. As Information Society and Media Commissioner Viviane Reding points out, “today, media literacy is as central to

9 Directive 2007/65/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2007 amending Council Directive 89/552/EEC on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the pursuit of television broadcasting activities.

Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32007L0065&from=HR>.

10 <http://euromedialiteracy.eu/>

11 See more in the overview of media literacy research in Europe. Available at: <http://www.cost.eu>.

12 2006 public consultation on media literacy

13 Communication from the Commission to the European parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a European approach to media literacy in the digital environment. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0833&from=EN>.

active and full-fledged citizenship as literacy was in the early 19th century”. Communication on media literacy is an important step towards European media literacy policy in general and will contribute to the solid construction of European audiovisual policy under the overall i2010 initiative. The main goal is to highlight and promote good practices in media literacy at European level and to suggest possible future activities in that field. Communication is also based on the results of the work of the Media Literacy Expert Group.

EU Directive 2010/13 on audiovisual media services¹⁴, adopted on 10.03.2010 by the European Parliament and the Council, was developed in cooperation and coordination with the national legislations of the EU Member States. This Directive regulates audiovisual media services, including television and Internet services. Virtually all services that offer audiovisual content, no matter what technology is used to convey the content. Binding rules apply equally, whether you watch the news or other audiovisual content on TV, the Internet, or on a mobile phone. Basically, Directive 2010/13 / EU replaces Directive 89/552 / EEC and is adopted to harmonize certain provisions laid down by law, regulation, or administrative measure in the EU Member States relating to the regulation of audiovisual media services. However, on 25.05.2016, the European Commission adopted a New Draft Law amending the Audiovisual and Media Services Directive. The reform brings the Directive in line with new realities.

Media literacy and the Republic of North Macedonia

For the first time, special attention in the legislation of North Macedonia is committed to media literacy in the Draft Strategy for Development of the Broadcasting Activity in the Republic of Macedonia for the period 2013-2017¹⁵. The document clearly emphasizes the need to promote media literacy as the greatest interest of the Macedonian society, a process in which educational institutions should be included with mechanisms for checking the effects of media education in the curriculum, media professionals by developing self-regulatory codes related to professional standards for increasing their responsibility in creating media products, regulatory bodies in the field of media and electronic communications by developing special programs with multiple activities related to media literacy, civil society representatives with various initiatives and projects, as well as scientific research institutions in this area.

Even with the entry into force of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services at the end of 2013 (December 25, 2013), media literacy enters the media policy in the Republic of Macedonia and as a result of the process of harmonization of media laws with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. It was regulated in the Law by several articles.

14 Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32010L0013>.

15 See more: http://avmu.mk/files/1_predllog_strategija.pdf. This Draft Strategy was not adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, but still exists today as a document on the website of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

The Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services from 2013, was amended in 2021¹⁶, where media literacy as a concept can be met in two articles. Article (6) in which the Competencies of the Agency of audio and audiovisual services are described, notes the Agency's duty to encourage media literacy.

In that context, in the section on social inclusion and media literacy (Article 26) "the Agency undertakes activities to encourage media literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia" (paragraph 2), "in undertaking those activities cooperates with NGOs, citizens' associations, educational institutions and other interested parties and publishes them on its website" (paragraph 3). The undertaken activities of this Article are an integral part of the annual work report for the previous year of the Agency. However, nowhere in the Law can one find a definition or explanation of what is meant by media literacy.

However, viewed in a broader context, both the previous (Law on Broadcasting) and the recent media legislation (Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services), harmonized with the Council of Europe Convention on Transfrontier Television, later renamed the Audiovisual Directive media services, as the most important legally binding acts in the audiovisual field, refer (directly or indirectly) to media literacy. Thus, for example, the regulation of the basic principles of child protection (content inappropriate for children, prohibition of broadcasting pornographic content or violence, etc.), the principles related to advertising for the protection of media consumers (prohibition of covert advertising, etc.), the pluralism of audiovisual services, the fight against media concentration, undoubtedly reflect the need for media literacy.

The Agency prepared a Program for encouraging media literacy in the Republic of Macedonia. The main goals of the Program are to raise awareness of the concepts of media literacy, to contribute to the understanding of media literacy by citizens, to improve the conditions for civic and democratic participation. In April 2017, at the initiative of the Agency, the Macedonian Media Literacy Network was established. The purpose of establishing the Network is to promote cooperation between the various actors in Macedonian society that create and implement policies and implement activities and projects in the field of media literacy. Nevertheless, neither the Ministry of education and science, nor other relevant governmental bodies made serious steps in integrating the media literacy education in the system. From the previously conducted analyzes and research on the inclusion of media literacy in the education system, it can be concluded that such a separate subject does not exist. Instead, parts of the media literacy are incorporated into different subjects of the programs¹⁷.

In contrast, Slovenia is the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to introduce the subject of media literacy into the education system. Media education, defined as the "learning process for the media and with the media", officially became part of the curricula of primary, secondary and higher education (with a special subject for teachers) in 1999, and since 2000 - a non-compulsory part of preschool education. for children from 4 to 6 years¹⁸. The concept of media literacy as an important tool for dealing with fake news is very important for the citizens of a country. If children from an early age get to know and learn to use it, then it would contribute to reducing the mass phenomenon – of fake news and facts. Propaganda is also a big problem, especially in transition countries. Doctrinal, fake news is defined as inaccurate/untrue facts or information whose untruth or inaccuracy can be proven. So, it is not a manipulation of real facts (distortion, silencing, or sharpening of facts), but a typical lie, for example, fake news that a certain person is dead or that the person is alive.

16 Law on audio and audio-visual media services ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" no. 184/13, 13/14, 44/14, 101/14, 132/14, 142/16, 132/17, 168/18, 248/18 and 27/19 and ("Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia" no. 42/20 and 77/21). Available at: <https://praksis.mk/>.

17 Sopar V. Temenugova, A. Aksentievskaa, M. (2018), Media literacy in Macedonia: Efforts for Implementation in Elementary Education.

18 Ibid.

It is one of the propaganda techniques, aimed at defocusing and manipulating public opinion. Fake news is not a new phenomenon, but with social networks, it seems to have got its most favorable natural environment. Each individual has at his disposal a tray for spreading lies. Because we have no institutional (media) responsibility behind them, they become a dangerous mass phenomenon.

From the latest European Commission report on the progress of North Macedonia¹⁹, in the subpart freedom of expression there is an overall note that the country has made slight progress i.e., the regulator continued its engagement with civil society organizations and media outlets on promoting media literacy; continued to be proactive in the promotion of the media literacy and in warning against inflammatory or discriminatory language, hate speech, unprofessional journalistic reporting, as well as on pressure and threats on journalists and media outlets; and the fight against disinformation and activities related to media literacy is mostly carried out by civil society.

The Ministry of education and science of the Republic of North Macedonia must consider the great importance of integrating media literacy as part of the education curricula. During the Trump elections, Veles was very popular for spreading fake news which gives an overall not-so-good picture of the education program. Propaganda spread in the media in regards to COVID-19 also gives a bad impression on the level of literacy. People need to look for the sources of the media content and need to double-check the information. The set of skills is developed at an early age, mainly in primary school. This also requires teachers that are competent to share the knowledge and have expertise about this literacy.

Therefore, trainings and programs for educating the teachers are imperative for developing a good program. This requires budget allocations, and experts for conducting the trainings. The impression is that this is not the problem, but the political will of the political representatives and their acquaintance with the concept. The literature is also a problem. Books in Macedonian language about media literacy are scarce. The number is very low and great steps in improving and updating the books and relevant data must be done.

A crucial issue is the debate for regulation and self-regulation of online media. Although the specific laws in North Macedonia do not regulate online media, their regulation is dispersed in other laws. Those are: the Criminal Code, the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, the Law on Copyright and Related Rights, the Law on Personal Data Protection, the Law on Free Access to Public Information, the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, the Law on Labour Relations, and the Law on Archive Material, the Law on Electronic Commerce and others. This big area needs to be revised and analyzed separately, but it is undoubtedly in close connection with the concept of media literacy.

It can be concluded that civil society plays a great role in promoting media literacy using domestic and foreign grants, as per se this is a very important area for the international community. This is an integral part of the overall index and factor in the democracy scores. Literate citizens are important for maintaining the independence of the media and financial sustainability; they are a key factor in battling fake news and propaganda. A very low score of 1.00 out of 7.00²⁰ was given for the indicator Independent Media, which examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media. The state of competitive authoritarianism, even though not publicly stated, is common for the Western Balkan countries. It means dependent media and a low level of democracy.

19 European Commission North Macedonia Report 2021. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en.

20 Freedom House, Nations of Transit 2021 Report.

The Republic of North Macedonia faces big challenges not only in promoting and integrating media and information literacy in the action documents and strategic plans of the policy area creators but also with the whole media system. If we make a diachronic analysis of the neighboring countries, we can conclude many similarities. For Bobbio²¹, one of the biggest broken promises of liberal democracy is the failure of the education system to produce rational voters. The media and digital literacy as its component are a very important segment of education in democracies and one of the most useful tools in the hands of voters, or perhaps in the hands of politicians.

The winner is the one who is more educated and knows how political communication actually works in the media world. The Internet and online media enable better exercise of freedom of expression and promote concepts such as digital democracy, voluntary communication, public journalism, and others in this regard. The interconnection of the Internet and politics provides an opportunity to discuss many political topics. These are approach, technological determinism, public sphere, liberalism, communitarianism, deliberative democracy, etc. Does the Internet meet the criteria for the dispersion of democracy? North Macedonia can contribute to raising the level of educated citizens by paying more attention to the educational policies, in order to promote the skills and to separate them in special subjects from the general curriculum. It is important for children from an early age to differentiate concepts, create their own views and judgments, be critical, be able to distinguish a true source of information from an irrelevant source, and make decisions based on strong and proven facts.

One thing is for sure, the challenge of the state apparatus is great. Efforts for major change are crucial, and the political will to produce strong and critical citizens is essential. Media literate citizens build a strong state. Digital transformation, as a part of the MIL concept is an opportunity for the Western Balkans to tackle some of the structural economic, political and social challenges in the region. Insufficient level of education for the media, digital literacy as well as media law are the root of many political problems that have become very crucial. It refers to the ability of the individual to find, evaluate, produce and communicate clear information through writing and other forms of communication on a variety of digital platforms.

They aspire to membership in the European Union, but must first remove barriers to the free flow of information between policy makers and those on whose behalf these decisions are made (the public). In terms of media and transition, these countries have a low culture of word use and a lack of public accountability. Individuals and groups express ideas of superiority over a particular race, religion, or nation with the intent to humiliate those who do not belong to “their” group and to seek persecution, isolation, and even genocide. In such cases, freedom of expression is too widely interpreted and transformed into other forms. This is the main generator of intolerance and prejudice on national, ethnic, religious and other grounds. These appearances actualize the discussion on freedom of expression, its international (international legal instruments and the practices of the European Court of Human Rights) and national legal bases, its restrictions and the abuse of this freedom.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Internet is not fully embedded in the country’s political communication (or, more precisely, not properly embedded). A key precondition for optimal use of the Internet in the field of political communication is the rapid application of technology with the simultaneous transformation of people’s minds. This transformation involves rejecting the principle of secrecy in the political activities of the government and political parties in BiH, which is in layers contrary to the nature of the Internet. There is also a need to cultivate public awareness of the importance of online public opinion and the need to more clearly distinguish between the online and offline political scene. The transformation of the media in North Macedonia is an absurd that is worth studying, and evaluating and should serve as a lesson.

21 Bobbio, N. (1987), *The Future of Democracy*, p 36.

The role of the media in society is in constant regression and instead of covering the turbulent development of the democratization process, it can be said that, arising or resulting from them, they are losing ground. From process leaders, they have become chroniclers of the political affiliation of certain centers of power, oligarchic circles, and in the worst cases; they became megaphones of the interests of their owners, of the political and other alienated interests of their bosses.

Serbian media and politics are still living in the past. Tamara Skrozza²² gives an excellent overview of the situation today, equating it with the time of Slobodan Milosevich, with the only difference being that Milosevich is no longer here. The media “voluntarily” agree to be an instrument in the hands of politicians and tycoons in order to survive economically in the market. At the local level, the situation is even worse, where local politicians wield all their economic and political power, making it almost impossible for a local media outlet to report independently and politically neutrally. The Law on Public Information and the Law on Broadcasting has been adopted, but the problem is in the institutions responsible for their implementation.

The challenge of the Western Balkan countries is large-scale. It includes not only the phenomenon of promotion, development and integration of this literacy in the system, but also building crucial changes in the way the entire media sphere functions. These processes are inevitably closely linked and interdependent. It can simply be said that media and digital literacy are correctors of the functioning of the media world. One thing is for sure, this literacy is necessary in the process of building a strong state and strong educated citizens.

Conclusion

The media is a sensitive topic for our country. We are aware of the prevailing propaganda, of the flow of information, much of which is even untrue. The awareness of the citizens starting from the youngest age must be developed in the direction of real evaluation of the information and formation of real attitudes about the events. It is necessary to make great strides in defining media literacy as a key competence and in appropriately integrating it in the strategic documents in the field of education and in the media sphere as a critical understanding of media content. Encouraging public debates between the representatives of the competent state institutions, the education sector, non-governmental organizations, and the media industry on the importance and the state of media literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia. The involvement of the academics should be increased, because they are drivers in scientific proposals and knowledge, conducting research and projects through which this concept will be promoted. Encourage the competent institutions to organize campaigns to raise awareness of the techniques used for commercial purposes, especially for product placement, and online advertising, in order to better understand the citizens on the border between marketing and content. Encouraging increasing access to media and information and communication technologies at local, regional, and national levels, so that more citizens have access to media and information and communication technologies, including the elderly, people with physical disabilities, people in a difficult economic and social situation.

22 Skrozza, T. Media and politics: Living in the past.

Providing all citizens with information on the safe use of media and information and communication technology, paying special attention to sensitive categories, such as children and youth. To achieve all this, cooperation must be ensured with all relevant international institutions and organizations active in the field of media literacy, including UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, because a media and information literate person must not only be a consumer of information and media content, but also a responsible person seeking information, a knowledge maker and an innovator who can use various tools and media for information and communication.

North Macedonia must undertake serious steps for promotion and integrating media literacy in the educational programs. This requires political will and, most importantly, a well-established group with prominent members of the media community that will make a medium-term action plan with activities, exact dates of realization, source of funding and pool of members and pool of institutions. Given the fact that the international organizations give financial support to many activities regarding the promotion of this concept, the budget excuses cannot be taken as relevant. Curricula in developed European countries already include subjects that aim to develop the ability and responsibility to critically accept media messages. The German curriculum, for example, has long envisioned training the student to receive media messages critically, building the ability to counter those messages, if not based on facts, and counteracting stereotypes and consumer clichés, which is one of the priority goals of this program. Undoubtedly, this concept is consistent with the phenomenon of fake news, which is especially dangerous when it spreads through the mainstream media.

It is very important to start developing the concept of media responsibility. Media responsibility has begun to be discussed in the United States and it is complicated and includes media law, journalistic professionalism (standards in the journalistic profession) and media with the understanding of citizens with high integrity (quality media) (especially digital literacy). Nowadays, we are starting to listen more and more about future literacy²³. How can we better understand the role that the future plays in what they see and do, if we do not have the skills and competences for critical thinking about the media and information that we consume? In the 1970s, when McLuhan wrote about the “classroom without walls”, saying that the media contested the educational pre-eminence of the school, he would never have been able to imagine what occurs nowadays.

23 Since 2012, UNESCO, in its role as a global laboratory of ideas, has demonstrated that people can become aware of why and how they use the future.

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Author

Martina Gligorova



Martina Gligorova studied Law at University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Law faculty “Iustinianus Primus”, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia (2011-2014). In 2020, Martina has enrolled on PhD studies at University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Law faculty “Iustinianus Primus” in the field of studies: international law. From 2019, she is working in the Ministry of Information Society and Administration, in the Unit for EU Integration and International Cooperation. In the previous years, during her bachelor and master studies, more precisely from January 2015 until September 2015 she was an Intern in the Macedonian Institute for European Studies. Martina Gligorova has been one of the alumni of the Geoffrey Nice Foundation, Hague, Netherlands (fellow of the Fifth Master Class on “Political Expediency behind International Criminal Courts”).

gligorova_martina@yahoo.com