



## ***The MELIA Observatory Project***

### **Media Literacy Observatory for Active Citizenship and Sustainable Democracy**

**Output T1.3. Guidelines with Action Plan for policymakers, with special focus on areas of media, education and youth issues, in relation with democratic governance**

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## Introduction

This document was created after carefully reviewing data gathered in the MELIA project. Its main goal is to provide policy makers with relevant information regarding the most pressing issues surrounding media literacy and education especially in those countries where such a policy does not yet exist or its formulation is currently being discussed. Policy recommendations are formulated so that they can be easily adapted to specific contexts, and each of them is operationalized in concrete measures that could be taken by the authorities in their attempt to regulate, enhance or change the media literacy and media education milieus. Moreover, the document also offers an action plan, which includes a nine-step approach to creating a new or fundamentally altering an existing media literacy policy.

Media literacy is a broad concept, with a wide range of fluid and contested definitions. Media literacy is most commonly described as a skill set that promotes critical engagement with messages produced by the media. Recent definitions have begun a shift away from protection toward empowerment. Renee Hobbs, among others, describes media literacy as a practice that is both individual and communal and not simply inoculation against negative messaging but empowerment to engage with media as citizens<sup>1</sup>.

In this document we will use the EU Media Literacy Expert Group conceptualization, according to which media literacy refers to “all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with media. These capacities allow us to exercise critical thinking, while participating in the

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbs, R. (2017). Teaching and learning in a post-truth world. *Educational Leadership* 75(3), 26-31.  
[http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/nov17/vol75/num03/Teaching\\_and\\_Learning\\_in\\_a\\_Post-Truth\\_World.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/nov17/vol75/num03/Teaching_and_Learning_in_a_Post-Truth_World.aspx)

economic, social and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process”.<sup>2</sup>

As a field, media literacy suffers from scarce empirical studies having high quality data. Moreover, media literacy is caught in a vicious circle of having very limited systematic data on media education interventions, which in turn impedes the efforts to clarify goals and define clear policies. Yet to create such a body of research requires sophisticated media education interventions and policies.<sup>3</sup>

Another difficulty for drafting policy recommendations stem from the high diversity of institutional, legal and socio-cultural contexts among the countries in the MELIA project. They include both EU and non-EU member states, and some of the diversity is due to this aspect, since the EU as a supranational actor is engaged in many activities focusing on media literacy and media education. Moreover, media education and literacy are directly related to the broader milieu of freedom of expression, freedom of thought, politicization / instrumentalization of news, the laws and practices governing the regime of media ownership, quality of education and strength of civil society sector. For the countries included in the MELIA project, media indicators vary considerably. For example, the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, created by Reporters without Borders, which is focusing on ease of access to information, reporting freedom, state control of reporters, and even chasing and threatening of reporters, ranks the countries in this project as follows (out of a total of 180 countries): Germany 13, Slovenia 36, Czech Republic 40, Romania 48, Croatia 56, Hungary 92, Serbia 93, Montenegro 104 and Bulgaria 112.

Another important category of attributes that explain and predict media literacy refers to the quality of schooling education. A series of recent studies found the most consistent

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<sup>2</sup> Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28, European Audiovisual Observatory, Strasbourg, 2016, p.32.

<sup>3</sup> Lemish,D. (2015). Children and Media: A Global Perspective. Wiley Blackwell, p.205.

predictor of decreased susceptibility to misinformation about Covid-19 is numerical literacy – the ability to digest and apply quantitative information broadly<sup>4,5</sup>. The results of PISA 2018, the latest wave of the only large cross-national study that measure numerical literacy ranks the countries in MELIA project as follows (out of a total of 180 countries): Slovenia 13, Germany 19, Czech Republic 24, Hungary 33, Croatia 37, Serbia 44, Romania 49, Bulgaria 50, Montenegro 54.

The research on the determinants of media literacy also found that the level of development of civil society organizations tend to be a positive predictor of the social, civic and creative capacities that allow citizens to have a critical understanding of the media. The 2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, which reports on the state of CSO sectors in 24 countries in the region, across seven dimensions of the sustainability of the civil society sector (legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, sectoral infrastructure, and public image) ranks the ex-communist countries in MELIA project as follows: Czech Republic 4, Slovenia 7, Croatia 9, Bulgaria 10 (and declining), Romania 13, Hungary 18, Montenegro 18, Serbia 20 (and declining).

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<sup>4</sup> Braund M. (2021). Critical STEM Literacy and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, 1–18. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42330-021-00150-w>

<sup>5</sup> Roozenbeek Jon, Schneider Claudia R., Dryhurst Sarah, Kerr John, Freeman Alexandra L. J., Recchia Gabriel, van der Bles Anne Marthe and van der Linden Sander 2020 Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world. Soc. open sci. 7201199201199 <http://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.201199>

## Policy recommendations

We identified eight policy directions that could serve as basis for potential policy reform in the field of media literacy and media education. Although these recommendations have been throughout out by analyzing comparatively data from the MELIA countries project, we believe that they may have broader applicability, especially for countries where media literacy and education are not entirely fleshed out and implemented concepts, and where concrete policies on developing media literacy are either not fully implemented or insufficiently developed. Each policy recommendation is operationalized by identifying concrete measures that government could take in order to achieve the best results in media literacy and education strategies.

1. **Develop a comprehensive understanding of the media environment.** The capacity to have a critical understanding of and interact with media does not rest solely with an individual, but with institutions, technology platforms, and nations. Therefore, countries could create a media literacy and education taskforce (formed of policy makers, journalists, media industry representatives, scholars, educators, lawyers, IT) appointed by the state whose main responsibilities would include:
  - To elaborate periodic reports on the state of the media environment (including historical evolutions, legal limitations, media pluralism, global, national and local trends in media evolutions). These periodic reports are intended to offer to the general public and interested stakeholders an updated and comparative image of the media sector.
  - To monitor media dynamism: types of media, style of media messaging, new actors on the media stage, fusions, trends in popularity of various media mediums.
  - To monitor media freedom: create a database of media freedom indicators (complementing those already created in international databases with local

information, especially in terms of identifying the most recent threats to media freedom as these can originate with the political regime, but also with foreign influences or private interested within/outside the country).

- To raise red flags on media monopolies and identify ways to counteract their effects.
- To establish relationships with similar institutions in other countries.

2. **Develop national media literacy evidence bases.** The establishment and funding of national bodies responsible for measuring changes in media use, education, and attitudes would provide important benefits to decision-makers and stakeholders alike. Moreover, policymakers should support the inclusion of an assessment of students' media literacy competences in the next round of the OECD PISA test. This strategy could include:

- The establishment of a state institution/committee responsible for creating/maintaining databases on media literacy. This could be associated to existing national statistics organizations, education boards or other institutions. This body would consist of a group of hired experts whose work would be complemented by an advisory board consisting of scholars, civil servants, media representatives and educators. The national body would have representatives in school boards in all counties.
- Database creation that would take into account already existent information and make sure that measures included in the database would be compatible with those already in use in other countries in order to create a comparative perspective.
- Database will include:
  - measures of media use/media consumption patterns (both types of media most commonly used and time spent by consumers in relation to different types of media). Special attention should be given to the youth, whose



media consumption patterns should be monitored closely, especially from the perspective of fake news, online bullying, social networks, etc.

- measures of media literacy
- attitudes towards media
- To create more integration between various datasets, so that media literacy is included in various pre-existing data collection processes (such as OECD – PISA)

**3. Build a ‘one stop-shop’ online portal with information about media literacy and online safety and signposting them to existing media literacy resources.**

- One stop-shop should be created by consulting stakeholders in media literacy (educators, legal experts, online safety experts, IT, representatives of state’s Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Defence, Police, Fraud, etc.)
- One stop-shop will include both resources for fighting fake news and examples of bad practice of media coverage.
- One stop-shop should be featured in all media outlets, and promoted among various socio-economic groups, especially the youth and the most vulnerable.
- One stop-shop will include interactive applications encouraging users to engage with hot topics in media literacy such as fake news, hate speech, cyber security or cyber bullying, and learn about their dangers and consequences.
- One stop-shop will also include short/poster like information regarding media literacy hot topics, designed in an accessible and friendly/funny manner, so that users can learn about the topic.
- One stop-shop needs to be permanently updated by relevant stakeholders in the field of media literacy, with timely examples and the newest techniques of fighting fake news, etc.

**4. Improve cross-disciplinary and intersectoral collaboration.** In addition to media literacy discipline, findings from social psychology provide useful results in decision-

making, findings from political science help explain how we justify partisan positions and how spread rumours, findings from sociology clarify the ways in which polarization impacts our values, results from communication studies show who is most susceptible to conspiracy theories. The recent crises of fake news provide opportunities to build greater coherence within the field as well as cross-disciplinary collaboration, and to identify what is known and unknown. Moreover, policymakers should facilitate and invest in large-scale collaboration initiatives between media literacy educators, researchers, social media platforms, journalists and NGOs. Therefore, we suggest that:

- Cross-disciplinary and intersectoral collaboration is essential, since media literacy and all, that it entails has connections with several disciplines, ranging from media studies, linguistics, to political science, psychology, education, or legal studies. Moreover, research teams should include both scholars and practitioners, such as media literacy educators, journalists and civil activists. Therefore, the state should create a dedicated funding line offering support for research that is fundamentally interdisciplinary. Additionally, such initiatives should be made available at the EU level as well.
- Creating cross-disciplinary collaboration is a process that entails reviewing existing such strategies (even in other fields) and accessing resources regarding research management, in universities and think tanks. Universities and other research entities should be put in contact, based on previous dialogue, and dedicated events for networking should be made available.
- Creating cross-sectoral collaboration is difficult given that most lines of funding either target research entities, or it is nongovernmental organizations that hire research experts, but working together across professional categories is not as common. Therefore, a set up research fund should include in eligibility conditions the requirement that both academics and practitioners need to co-apply.

5. **Develop education policies that aim to improve skills that are essential for media literacy, including numerical literacy, critical thinking and understanding biases.** There is a large and growing number of studies that rely on PISA comparative data, and some of their policy recommendations could be tailored to the particular circumstances of each of the countries in the MELIA project. Capitalizing on the PISA comparative data studies and their recommendations can be a starting point for contextualizing policies according to the needs and issues of each educational system. Therefore, we recommend that:

- Educational policies should include media literacy as an important skill/competence, and each country should seek to incorporate media literacy as it befits its own context.
- Educational policies should be formulated through significant consultation with relevant stakeholders: educators, scholars, media industry representatives and legal experts should be included in the co-creation process of a new educational policy. This is not to say that media literacy should be the core of an educational policy, but rather, that media literacy should be considered as high priority when creating an educational policy. As research conducted in MELIA countries show, some places include media literacy in the list of priorities for education, while others do not, or do so only discursively.
- A critical point is the connection between media literacy and democratic principles/values/behaviours. Because fake news, hate speech and online violence often correlated with situation of discrimination or hatred towards different minorities, any educational policy should include an important part on civic education. Civic education needs to cover all aspects of what it takes to live in a democracy and communicate effectively and strongly the need to respect human rights and obligations connected with the respect of others. As such, media literacy should always be communicated and presented as having

a direct and fundamental relationship with democratic values and principles, especially in the context of teaching media literacy and civic education.

6. **Develop media literacy curricula that enable full coverage of the five main competences for media literacy: access, analysis and evaluation, creation, reflection, and action/agency.** In addition, provide media educators with adequate support for addressing students' media literacy by bringing together school-based and out-of-school media literacy practices. The five main competences for media literacy are listed below.<sup>6</sup>

- **Access:** the ability to find and use media skilfully and to share suitable and valuable information with others (including browsing, searching, filtering and managing data, information and digital content).
- **Analysis and evaluation:** the capacity to comprehend messages and use critical thinking and understanding to analyse their quality, veracity, credibility and point of view, while considering their potential effects or consequences.
- **Creation:** the capacity to create media content and confidently express oneself with an awareness of purpose, audience and composition techniques.
- **Reflection:** the capacity to apply social responsibility and ethical principles to one's own identity, communication and conduct, to develop an awareness of and to manage one's media life.
- **Action/agency:** the capacity to act and engage in citizenship through media, to become political agents based on democratic values and attitudes.

7. **Upskill Librarians.** Libraries of many of the countries in the MELIA project already offer support to the public to help them access technologies and navigate the online environment. As a result, libraries are well placed to develop their role as media literacy 'hubs'. Libraries

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<sup>6</sup> [http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/31574/1/AR2\\_Teaching%20Media%20Literacy\\_NESET.pdf](http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/31574/1/AR2_Teaching%20Media%20Literacy_NESET.pdf)

are a staple of university life, while also being very important in schools and, of course, in the general population, through the public libraries system. Therefore, we recommend that:

- Librarians (all, but most importantly, those working with young people) should undergo trainings allowing them to specialize in raising media literacy skills among different publics. Libraries could both organize workshops on fighting fake news or cyber bullying, while posters should be placed in high visibility areas, and online apps should be installed in public computers functioning in libraries.
- Libraries should have on their website apps that can be downloaded, or websites that the user is referred to, that are interactive platforms for learning different skills related to media literacy.
- In universities and schools, librarians could offer their expertise in media literacy by offering workshops in different faculties, departments, schools, PTAs, etc.
- The technological progress regarding online library resources makes it possible for libraries to team up with IT experts and create various apps that would be accessible through each library's website. The apps could be designed to reflect different preferences and online navigation abilities (different and gamified for children, youth and older people who have less online navigation skills).
- Libraries could also host events where journalists, media representatives, civil society activists working on media literacy could discuss the most important issues regarding media literacy

**8. Work with social media influencers to help them raise awareness about media literacy amongst their audiences.** Social media influencers have untapped potential to promote media literacy and can have large audiences who are typically hard to reach through traditional education channels. Therefore, we suggest that:

- Social media influencers are very important when raising awareness about different social issues. Recruiting social media influencers is then critical for making information about media literacy circulate among their public. Just as social media, influencers have been instrumental in raising awareness about

anti Covid-19 vaccination (with various degrees of success); they could also contribute to increasing media literacy levels of the public.

- Social media influencers' effect would probably be the highest among the youth, since they are particularly interested in following various influencers on social media. Therefore, including social media influencers in national campaigns would be focused on developing critical media literacy skills among the youth.

**9. Tailor media literacy policy and education by adjustment to local needs and pre-existing cleavages.** In every society, there are inherent inequalities. Consequently, the needs for developing media literacy skills may be different in large, developed, university cities in comparison to small towns or rural areas. Similarly, access to technology is also dependent on socio-economic development so these vulnerabilities should be well understood in every national context, and strategies to improve media literacy should take into account various socio-economic indicators. Finally, pre-existing cleavages – especially ethnic or religious – would influence the choice of topics that could be subject to manipulation by different opinion leaders; understanding local social, economic and cultural features and adjusting strategies of media education needs to take these specificities into account. Therefore, we recommend that:

- a. Youth information campaigns regarding the dangers of disinformation should be tailored to each target group by taking into account local specificities.
- b. Inequality in having and using technologies should be taken into account when planning a media literacy campaign in a particular context.

## Action plan

Although national and regional contexts are important in creating policies on media literacy and media education, below we offer a model of an action plan that could be implemented in order to improve media literacy and education. The model should be understood as a schematic strategy that should be adjusted to the needs of each context. The action plan has most applicability in countries where media literacy and education are not yet fully developed, as is the case with most MELIA projects states.

The action plan offers an overview of potential stages to be followed when creating/changing media literacy and education policies, and it includes a suggested timeframe.

1. Create an institutional and knowledge-driven group of relevant social actors. (2022)
  - Identify all stakeholders involved in media literacy and education: educators, school boards, relevant ministry representatives such as education or research, media industry representatives, journalists, scholars, legal experts, civil society activists.
  - Create a media literacy standing working group that would be in-charge of drafting/amending media literacy and education policies proposals. The working group would include representatives from all categories mentioned above.
  - Create media literacy advisory boards on different subtopics related to media literacy, such as hate speech, fake news, literacy itself, etc.
2. Create relevant databases on the state of media literacy and education in the country, and on existing models of policies governing media literacy and education in other countries. (2022-2023)
  - Gather expert reports on the state of media literacy and education in the country.
  - Analyze existing datasets in order to form a full and contextual image of the state of media literacy in the country.

- Collect additional relevant information from other fields, such as education, social policy, the state of minorities, etc.
  - Collect information regarding the functioning of the media sector.
  - Collect comparative information, allowing the standing working group to evaluate media literacy in their own country in comparison to the situation elsewhere.
3. Establish a routine of consultations with relevant stakeholders at every step of policy formulation. (2022-2023)
- The media literacy advisory boards should be consulted whenever certain new ideas are introduced.
  - Moreover, educators, civic activists and the youth should also be regularly consulted.
4. Adopt a common working definition of media literacy and media education. (2023)
5. Deliberate on the envisioned main goals and objectives of the planned media literacy policy. Operationalize these objectives effectively, and make sure evaluation, monitoring and benchmarking are all taken into account. (2023)
6. Decide over one national frame regarding the inclusion of media literacy in the education system. (2023-2024) Attention should be paid to:
- Different cycles of schooling and adjusting media literacy competences to the pre-existing curricula/change pre-existing curricula.
  - Differences between schools functioning in diverse and developed cosmopolitan contexts and those in more remote areas.
  - Identify/form the relevant human resource that would be involved in teaching media education.
7. Identify main priorities of the planned media literacy and education policy. (2023-2024)
- Collect information on main issues characterizing the field of media literacy (competences, problems, knowledge evaluation, and interdisciplinarity).



- Decide on strategies to counteract hate speech, the spread of fake news, disinformation, cyber security, cyber bullying.
8. Incorporate feedback options – so that the policy does not end up being very difficult to amend/change. (2024)
  9. Test precise envisioned policy measures by collecting reactions to them from the relevant target groups. (2024-2025)

## Conclusion

This document aims to offer policymakers and to other stakeholders engaged with media literacy and media education a set of recommendations that could be taken into account when creating a new or amending an existing policy on media literacy. Since media literacy and media education have only rather recently become points of interest from the perspective of education policies, the recommendations that we put forth have most applicability in those countries where media literacy is not yet fully integrated in the education system or where media literacy is an insufficiently developed field. Although we strongly believe that each institutional, social and cultural context warrants the creation of tailored measures, we formulated policy recommendations that have rather broad and general applicability and that can be adjusted to the specificities of each context. The action plan at the end of this document is also a concrete nine step proposal that can be followed by policy makers when formulating a new media literacy policy or fundamentally altering the existing one.