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Putting media literacy on the map: Opportunities and challenges in Europe

LSE's Lee Edwards, Sonia Livingstone and Emma Goodman consider the findings of a recent mapping exercise of media literacy policy and practices across Europe, as part of a wider research project on which Lee and Emma were expert advisors.

Investment in media literacy initiatives continues to attract policy attention in countries across Europe. In the UK, for example, the recently-elected Labour government is considering a new media literacy approach, while the broadcast regulator, Ofcom, has just launched its **three-year media literacy strategy** as part of its obligations under the **Online Safety Act 2023**. In the European Union, there is a clear and important emphasis on media literacy within regulation such as the EU-level **Audiovisual Media Services Directive**, with the aim of ensuring citizens and users can access credible, verifiable and trustworthy information sources and media – an emphasis that also plays a significant role in some media literacy programmes at the national level (see, for example, Ofcom's work on **media literacy-by-design**). At first glance, then, it seems that media literacy may be squarely visible on the European policy 'map'.

A recent Google-funded **study on media literacy initiatives in Europe**, carried out by research firm Ecorys, provides a valuable snapshot of what this map looks like in reality, revealing that while media literacy initiatives are indeed extensive, gaps remain in media literacy provision. The study comprised multiple methods: an analysis of the legislative landscape, a review of Google's own media literacy programmes and their effectiveness and separately, national in-depth cases of the context, approach and practices of media literacy in eight countries: France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain and the UK.

In this blog post we highlight what can be learned from the national case studies to understand what is being done to identify good practice in media literacy education, as well as areas for policy improvement.

The European media literacy agenda

The case studies were selected to cover a range of perspectives and experiences in relation to media literacy policy and practice in Europe, including different national policy and regulatory contexts within which media literacy is supported in Europe; differences in underlying population characteristics, including levels of digital skills, media awareness and exposure to disinformation; and geographical balance across the regions of Europe. For example:

- In France, media literacy has flourished under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. Their policy impetus ensures that media literacy is embedded in both public libraries and schools and supports the country's 'epicentre' of media literacy, CLEMI (**The Centre for Media and Information Education**). CLEMI coordinates the provision of media literacy education in schools, produces resources for families, and collaborates with many different institutions to create media literacy projects that can be delivered at scale, such as the 'Week of the Press and Media in Schools.'
- In Germany too, state support for media literacy is well-established and the importance of media education is embedded in the school curriculum, although because media literacy is considered a state matter, there are federal discrepancies in levels of adoption.
- By contrast, in Romania there is less coordination at the policy level, because different aspects of media literacy (AI policy, digital skills) are incorporated into different legal frameworks. Nonetheless, the national landscape includes a range of initiatives being undertaken by the state, public authorities, educational institutions, NGOs and other stakeholders. Media literacy courses have been developed as options for school curricula, while journalistic and non-profit organisations (e.g. the Center for Independent Journalism Romania, the Funky Citizens Association, the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media) have also developed initiatives such as training to develop critical information skills.

In the main, findings from the eight case studies suggest that the focus of media literacy programmes tends to be on practical skills and awareness of misinformation / harmful content online. Of course, the diversity of European contexts is considerable, but there are common and important trends.

All eight countries experienced significant concern that low trust and spiralling misinformation would negatively affect social cohesion and open societies. No wonder, therefore, that their media literacy agendas prioritise digital literacy and online safety. In this context, media literacy is often understood as an additional 'line of defence' against perceived online harms, complementing regulation at the EU and national level.

Thus, the efforts at national and regional level tend to focus on ensuring that people's lives online are safe and secure, and engaging users in the knowledge and behaviours necessary for both

enhancing trust in information and institutions, as well as for identifying and tackling misinformation. The emphasis is practical – focusing on skills development and tools that enable users to navigate the media environment, particularly the online environment, effectively. The work is extensive, delivered by a diverse range of stakeholders and media literacy partners, and the media literacy agenda continues to evolve in response to the increasing complexities of online media and the challenges they pose to individuals, the public and society more widely.

Limitations of the current landscape

Focus

Nonetheless, the value that media literacy programmes can deliver remains somewhat truncated. For example, while media literacy may be featured in national curricula, the degree to which relevant skills are embedded in outcomes remains unclear, suggesting that media literacy may be approached as a general skill, or a ‘nice to have’ in the curriculum, but not taken seriously as an area that has the potential to significantly **affect our individual and collective well-being**. Stakeholders who were interviewed for the research argued for a reassertion of the broader skills and benefits related to media literacy, including a focus on critical thinking and on the role and use of media as a channel for active citizenship.

Their views echo findings from a **systematic review** of research on digital literacy interventions for young people that indicate training in technical skills alone does not produce positive outcomes (e.g. boost in well-being, lower vulnerability). In contrast, including **information skills** (i.e. accessing and critically evaluating information) alongside technical, communication and content creation skills in media literacy training is associated with more online activities, more creativity online, higher academic grades, a more positive orientation to technology and better coping behaviours while online. A separate study of **online behaviour among UK media literacy experts** showed that both functional and critical digital literacy are needed for effective engagement online.

These results notwithstanding, it is also important to note that the focus on developing media literacy skills in order to tackle misinformation has a limited evidence base; a recent **rapid evidence review** of academic research showed only limited evidence for a positive link between media literacy skills training and behaviours that can address misinformation, suggesting that the reliance on a technical skills approach to media and digital literacy may be misplaced.

Sector challenges

The study also revealed the ongoing structural challenges that media literacy faces, including often fragmented sectors with an abundance of different providers, a lack of policy direction in many cases, and limited or precarious funding. Similar findings emerged from a **study of UK-based media literacy stakeholders**, suggesting that these challenges may characterise contexts where media literacy remains a lower policy priority. These issues make it harder to both coordinate and monitor

media literacy interventions, and therefore limit countries' understanding of how effective media literacy is in achieving its stated goals. For example, the cases showed that delivering media literacy to groups outside formal education, including vulnerable and marginalised children and adults, remains a challenge. This could raise the risk of uneven distribution of media literacy actually increasing inequalities, rather than reducing them, given that [previous research](#) suggests that a lack of digital literacy among already disadvantaged children can exacerbate their marginalisation.

Looking ahead

As this brief summary indicates, [the study](#) makes an important contribution to identifying the cross-national patterns of both good practice and challenges. Its recommendations are clear. First, media literacy strategies need to foster a broad agenda, including critical engagement with information and creative skills, alongside skills to access and navigate media and information systems on and offline. Second, the reach of media literacy should be expanded both within formal educational settings and beyond them, to ensure universal access to this vital training, and to address the needs of currently marginalised populations. More investment in measurement and evaluation of programmes is essential, so that countries know whether and how programmes are achieving their desired objectives. And finally, consistent and reliable funding for resources and training is vital, including for maintaining skills in a rapidly transforming environment.

These recommendations are not insignificant, but media literacy has a vast pool of resources when the transnational scale of the work being done is considered. The common focus on mis- and disinformation, societal resilience, and policy overlaps across the cases – all suggesting that developing transnational partnerships to enhance practice that works, and to build the collective energy needed to address challenges, could be one important route to success. The EU's European Digital Media Observatory is one example of how collaboration can generate real benefits that are shared across countries as a result of the increased sharing of knowledge and ideas in a multinational community. In the end, media literacy is too important to be left to its own devices. Active intervention and support from all stakeholders interested in healthier, more equitable and more resilient societies, is vital for our collective future.

This post represents the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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