

Bringing Media Literacy into Education and Policy



*Today and tomorrow, the first European Media and Information Literacy Forum will be held at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris bringing together NGOs, media professionals, educators, and other stakeholders. **Eva Lievens and Verónica Donoso**, researchers at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Law & ICT at **KU Leuven**, propose two key considerations for new methods of integrating media literacy into existing educational*

frameworks, and the policymakers' role in sustaining it.

Over the past 4 years, the User Empowerment in Social Media Culture (**EMSOC**) research project has been critically assessing user (dis)empowerment in the context of social media. Our findings emphasize the role of 'media literacy' or 'media education' as essential to mitigating online risks and fully taking advantage of the opportunities social media offers. The specificity of social media, however, requires the acquisition of specific and sometimes new (social) media knowledge and skills, such as being able to assess the veracity of certain posts, having the capacity to cope with sexting or cyberbullying incidents, or grasping the impact that behavioural advertising can have on our privacy. Two important observations can be made with regard to this seemingly obvious finding.

Transitioning to new media curricula

First, we should be careful not to confine media literacy solely to its traditional incorporation into school curricula. This is indeed necessary, however, we should also start thinking outside of the box. Informal learning environments, social networks or digital communities (be it 'mini' social networks offered by the public service broadcaster to young children to acquaint them with basic social media skills or online book clubs) can not only enhance user skills through participation in itself, but may also be included in regular school activities, or, even more important, in teacher training programmes. Putting forward the role of teachers as facilitators of creativity and innovation should be a key goal of those programmes in current and future digital contexts. In addition, we should explore innovative methods to deal with media literacy issues.

Experiments conducted in the framework of the EMSOC-project include the use of co-design methods to actively involve children in the creation of class-based anti-cyberbullying policies or the 'translation' of complex social network Terms of Use into more user-friendly formats. Participatory strategies, be it at a macro level (policy for the whole society) or a micro level (policy for smaller groups of individuals, e.g. a school or class), should also be encouraged in order to incorporate users' needs, values and interests into the development of more effective user-oriented policies.

Strengthening existing frameworks and initiatives

A second important finding relates to the fragmentation of existing digital media literacy initiatives. This is clearly illustrated by the many one-shot awareness campaigns and the significant range of short-term projects carried out by very diverse actors and organisations. While significant time, effort and resources are being invested by various organisations, more concerted action from all involved stakeholders should be framed within a coherent digital media strategy. If this does not happen an enormous amount of expertise may potentially be lost as soon as every project, with its corresponding funding, comes to an end. Moreover, the actual impact of the various initiatives targeting digital media literacy is almost never measured or evaluated. Either this crucial step was never foreseen in the project design or the budget has run out by the time an assessment should

happen. Finally, the lack of coordination not only generates overlap with regard to the creation of material and training schemes, but also the risk of communicating conflicting messages to users.

Governments can and should play a role in remedying these flaws in the media literacy field by embedding media literacy in broader policy frameworks. Setting up coordination nodes, which monitor and coordinate media literacy initiatives (such as 'mediawijs.be': a knowledge centre dedicated to this task, set up by the Flemish government) could be one remedy. Building a long-term policy upon high-quality evidence-based research and, especially, lessons learnt from impact assessments of previous initiatives, is an indispensable one.

For more information, please visit www.emsoc.be/academic-community/. A White Paper summarizing all EMSOC research results as well as recommending various courses of action for different stakeholders will be published in Fall 2014.

This post gives the views of the authors, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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