Media Literacy and Education Needs of Journalists and the Public in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia

Considerations and Policy Recommendations

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a document issued in conjunction with the Regional Conference
MEDIA LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF THE JOURNALISTS AND THE PUBLIC,
Skopje, 28-29 March 2017

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Education needs of journalists and the public

Considerations and policy recommendation

For almost 20 years, a lot of efforts and resources have been put in the development of the journalists' capacity in South Eastern Europe. The results are still far from satisfactory and new developments in the media sector and in the world tend to make these efforts visibly insufficient.

Media environment today is different from what it used to be 20 years ago. We are now enjoying the benefits of multi-media, multi-platform journalism, toying with virtual reality as a story-telling tool, using bots to complement the editorial work of humans and addressing and engaging global audiences. The journalist's skills have changed and multiplied, the expectations of a technology-savvy public have increased.

The SEE Partnership for Media Development project investigated the way the countries in the region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) are prepared to deal with these new challenges. We looked at both the capacity of journalism schools to equip the future generations of journalists to perform in the new environment and the efforts conducted in order to prepare the public to navigate, use and critically evaluate the plethora of new or legacy media.

The study was conducted in the five countries between March 2016 - February 2017 and discussed in the *MEDIA LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF THE JOURNALISTS AND THE PUBLIC* regional conference, held in Skopje, on March 28-29, 2017.

Key findings:

- The education of media professionals and the education of the public are ends of the same information link that traverses the society; they may be treated either together or separately, but they feed into the same flow of information.
- Media and information literacy is a life skill that should be mastered by all citizens; for the time being, not all the countries/stakeholders understand and value its role in society;
- Media and information education should be an endeavor for all stakeholders, at national, regional and European level; for the time being, the non-state actors lead the way.
- Media and information education (with an emphasis on critical thinking and switching from consumption to action) should start at early ages, but address all ages; for the time being, the teenagers seem to be the focus of all efforts;

3

- The education of journalists should include both professionals and technological skills; currently, it is lagging behind, following obsolete curricula. Specialized journalism programs tend to be closed down.
- Efforts in the field of media education and media literacy should be in line with the technological development in order to keep their relevance; for the time being, they are often reactive instead of pro-active.

In order to improve the free flow of information in our societies, to secure a healthy degree of freedom of expression, exercised by responsible actors in an enabling environment, all stakeholders should concur and cooperate.

States

1. States shall support the freedom of expression as a core value and a fundamental human right. Freedom of the media and media literacy are components of this right and sates shall endeavor to promote and protect them.

2. States shall make media and information literacy (MIL) a priority and imagine ways to insert it into the core education in schools, as well as offering LLL alternatives. Extra curricular activities and communities center shall be considered for MIL purposes. Proper funding shall be secured for MIL programs.

2. States shall support gathering of structured and comprehensive information about journalism education, media and media literacy. Substantial research programs have to be dedicated, as these fields are under-researched although critical fields.

3. States shall provide for appropriate funding for education institutions (universities, schools) to allow for well prepared academics, high-profile guest lectors, up-to-date equipment and practical trainings.

4. States shall cooperate and support (including financially) the efforts of other stakeholders to promote media and information literacy, preferably in a bottom-up approach.

Universities

1. Public and private universities shall keep and modernize their journalism degree programs.

2. Universities shall increase the level of knowledge and training of teaching staff both in ICT and in media literacy, and open the courses for other professionals with diverse backgrounds.

3. Journalism education, as every other discipline in the education, is in a need of reforms, improvement of processes and addressing the gap between the education and the business.

4. Universities shall create and maintain career track systems for their alumni.

5. Universities shall turn into fore-runners in research and innovation in media literacy and diversify their offer for various categories of audiences.

Schools

1. Schools shall embrace the idea of media and information literacy as a life skill for students and insert it in a cross-topic approach;
2. Schools shall work to improve the level of knowledge and training of teaching staff both in ICT and in media literacy.
3. Schools shall open toward work with CSOs in developing creative, non-formal MIL programs. Schools shall position themselves as or cooperate with existent community centers, in order to provide MIL opportunities for the widest audience.
4. Teachers shall be encouraged and supported to cooperate, to engage in peer-to-peer professional development, create or be active in teachers associations. A community of education shall be created in order to facilitate a natural exchange of experience and cross-pollination of ideas.

Other stakeholders

1. Stakeholders interested in MIL shall develop and apply innovative approaches to media and information literacy programs, as well as initiate and develop cooperation with various institutions and authorities.
2. MIL programs shall aim at various audiences, of various ages, not only through the educational system

Business
1. Media companies shall respect and consistently enforce the journalistic standards and serve as a model for journalistic education and a baseline for MIL projects.
2. Media companies, industry and professional associations of media people shall endeavour to get involved and support journalism and MIL education.
3. Media companies shall cooperate with the universities to design and implement programmes better mirroring the changed needs of the industry and the changed consumer/audience information consumption patterns.
4. Media companies shall open to journalism students and freelancers/citizen-journalists, offering opportunities for acquiring practical know-how and work experience.
5. Technology companies shall acknowledge and embrace their role as freedom of expression agents, and therefore MIL stakeholders and act accordingly, supporting such programs.

Public Media Services
1. The public media services (PBS) shall serve as an example in observing the highest professional standards, while using advanced technologies in their journalistic and other media products.
2. The PBS shall include media literacy segments in their regular programming and use any channels they control to engage and educate the public.
3. PBS shall open to universities and actively participate in the formation of the new generations of journalists.

4. PBS shall cooperate with the education system in order to genuinely and fully perform their role in media education.

5. PBS shall have an active role in raising awareness on the need of comprehensive MIL programs open to all categories of public.

CSOs

1. CSOs shall continue to stay engaged in media and information literacy programs and use their insight and flexibility to create innovative projects in the field.

2. CSOs shall develop public campaigns on media and information literacy importance.

3. CSOs shall advocate the introduction of the media and information literacy into the educational system from the very beginning of schooling and promote alternative LLL activities.

4. CSO who have already acquired experience in designing and running MIL programs shall offer their expertise to the other interested stakeholders, especially to the state authorities.

European Union

1. EU shall promote and protect the freedom of expression, as a basic human right and media and information literacy as a needed life skill for all EU citizens. European institutions shall be a model for the member and aspiring states. EU shall monitor closely the governments of the member and aspiring states on their performance on freedom of expression and report regularly on the result of such monitoring.

2. EU shall position itself as a leader in the field of MIL, being creative and innovative rather than reactive, while serving as an enabler for exchanges of good practices among members and associate states.

3. Grass-root initiatives should be encouraged and supported, via long-term, flexible, collaborative engagement. Financial burden of MIL shall fall on states and/or profit-making entities, not on the non-for-profit ones.

While the suggested policy ideas may contribute to the promotion of a healthy and inclusive media education culture, there are still problems that are likely to persist and that could hamper any well-intended action.

Issues to be further addressed

1. **How do we secure a steady, genuine, cross-party political support for media and information literacy?**

As strong and sustained the actions of the other stakeholders are, a coherent and efficient media policy culture cannot be achieved without the support of decision-makers. These are by definition political actors. Therefore, it is up to them to manifest a strong and steady political will to create such a culture. They need to acknowledge the value of media and information education, support it openly and consistently, irrespective of their political affiliation.

2. Is there a danger for MIL to be ideologized?

Yes, there is and it is not minor. Media and information literacy is about critical thinking and creating one's own opinion. It is not about teaching people who is "good" and who is "bad", what to think and how to (re)act. There is a delicate fine line that educators and policy-makers have to pay attention to. MIL is not propaganda or indoctrination, but the very opposite of these. All MIL initiatives have to go as far as possible in order to secure a neutral approach. All the same, they have to provide sufficient protection to teachers and trainers that, by doing honestly their MIL education work, may be subject to political pressures or retaliation.

3. How do we evaluate our success in MIL?

The central figures of MIL are not the policy makers, or the educators, but the beneficiaries, the educated. It is their progress that one should follow and gauge in order to measure the progress of any MIL program. If it is relatively easy to document the activities and the outputs, it is still debatable how one can measure the degree of media literacy of a population. The recent propos of OCED's education director Andreas Schleicher[1] suggested that media literacy skills should be part of the standardized PISA tests. But what about the next step? How could one measure the way the knowledge and critical thinking skills translate into real, democracy-inspired active citizenship? These are issues that are deserving further consideration and a rather urgent answer.

4. Should MIL be institutionalized?

With such big expectations attached to it - embedded in formal education, trans-curricular, offered in various formal and informal shapes, open to all categories of people, at all ages, supported by a constellation of stakeholders and assumed - the MIL concept shall be soon standardized one way or another. Shall the MIL specialists receive a certain certification in the field, as other teachers do? And if so, who shall be in charge of such certification? What teaching skills and transferable knowledge should be certified? Is such a certification valid across borders or shall it be country-specific? Again, a flow of questions that do need attention.

5. What happens when our work is done? But is it ever?

In such a fluent environment as media, in societies so rapidly shapeshifting, with technology developing from day to tomorrow, when do we know that the work is done?

Tag words: media and education literacy, journalists, political will, strategy
peer-to-peer, PBS, freedom of expression, technology, EU, community, learning

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[1] http://www.bbc.com/news/education-39272841