Media Literacy in Education – A Western Balkans Perspective

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Media literacy, as an academic field, has been subject to several capacity-building projects in the Western Balkans, funded by a wide array of civil society organizations, as well as government-funded projects. The context of media literacy in formal education in each of the countries in the Western Balkans has not been adequately explored and remains a contested niche between the non-formal education facilitators and institutional policy-makers.

According to the 2022 Media Literacy Index published by the Open Society Institute – Sofia, a Bulgarian NGO working on governance, the EU integration process, and minority rights, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia are placed at 37th, 38th, 39th, and 40th place respectively, out of 41 countries, while Serbia and Montenegro rank at 32nd and 35th place respectively. The Index ranks countries according to the clusters based on PISA scores, press freedoms, etc. When comparing the same piece of research over the years, there is a clear tendency for the countries to rank worst from year to year, which is in line with the yearly Freedom House Reports, which rank countries based on their political and democratic freedoms. When comparing the two indexes, the correlation between political freedoms, participation in democratic processes, and media literacy is evident. The aim of this policy brief is to advocate for a solution for the two challenges mentioned above by offering viable solutions for them and producing results in the mid-term.

Media Literacy as an educational tool in Albania[1]

Several initiatives have been undertaken to integrate media literacy into the curriculum of Albanian schools. The inclusion of media literacy as a standalone subject or as part of

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[1] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/piloting-media-and-information-literacy-formal-education-albania-first-phase-finalized

existing subjects such as language arts or social studies provides students with the necessary tools to understand and critically engage with media content.

So far, there have been governmental and civil society moves towards providing teachers with the necessary training and resources to effectively teach media literacy, as well as to increase media literacy prevalence in teachers. These included workshops, seminars, and professional development programs with the aim of enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in media literacy education.

In order to fully implement the policies at hand, facilitate the exchange of expertise and resources enriching the learning experience for students and promote media literacy, partnerships between schools and media organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, were necessary. Despite all the efforts, limited time allocated to media literacy within the curriculum and the need for further training of teachers in specialized media education methods hinder the full realization of its potential impact.

Media literacy as an educational tool in BiH[2]

Given BiH post-conflict society, media literacy equips individuals with the tools to recognize and challenge media biases, stereotypes, and hate speech, promoting intercultural understanding and tolerance, being further fostered by the rapid growth of digital media platforms that has led to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation.

There have been pushes to incorporate media literacy into the national curriculum[3]. The Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH has lobbied for the introduction of media literacy components within subjects such as social studies, language arts, and information technology, and for a more pro-active approach in teachers' education and professional development, with varying degrees of success. Teacher training programs have been initiated to equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively teach media literacy concepts. Additionally, resources such as textbooks, online platforms, and educational materials are being developed to support teachers in delivering media literacy

[2] https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/bosnia-and-herzegovina-media-and-information-literacy-for-human-rights-and-more-democracy

[3] https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Medijska-pismenost-u-obrazovnom-sistemu-Bosne-i-Hercegovine-formalno-i-neformalno-Antonela-Opacak.pdf

education. Collaborations between CSOs and Education Ministries expose students to real-world media practices, helping them develop critical analysis skills and media production competencies, as well as fostering digital critical thinking.

By integrating media literacy into the country's decentralized curriculum, providing teacher training, and fostering collaborations with media organizations, the country can equip its students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the media landscape with confidence and discernment.

Media Literacy as an educational tool in Kosovo[4]

In an era dominated by information and media, it is crucial for individuals to possess the skills and mindset of media literacy. Media literacy is not merely about consuming information but understanding, analyzing, and critically evaluating it.

Similarly to other countries, Kosovo faces challenges related to media literacy. Various initiatives[5] have been taken to expand the knowledge of media literacy in Kosovo's society. The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation has taken a few steps toward including media literacy as a

course in some levels of education. It developed curricula for Media Literacy as an elective course in High-Schools, but it is not a mandatory course at all levels of education in Kosovo. The Department of Journalism at the University of Prishtina introduced Media Literacy as an elective course in 2009, yet with questionable outcomes.

In 2016[6], the OSCE Mission in Kosovo started a media literacy initiative aiming at integrating media literacy as a core course in the education system in Kosovo, starting from primary schools up to universities. The OSCE Mission in Kosovo has done multiple activities to further support this initiative. According to the OSCE Chief of Mission, Ambassador Davenport, the main goal is for media literacy to be included as a core course in all levels of education in Kosovo.

Media literacy as an educational tool in Montenegro

Having a look at the practices and projects done up to now, the government and programs supported by several international organizations have made some progress in the last years in closing the digital divide, encouraging the communication system or education in the field of technology usage.

[4] https://en.hive-mind.community/blog/73,the-three-necessary-actions-of-the-ministry-of-education-for-media-literacy-in-kosovo

[5] https://www.dukagjini.com/edukimi-medial-si-lende-obligative-ne-shkolla-nevoje-e-domosdoshme/

[6] https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/545668

In a survey done on media literacy, some results show the following trends[7]. Up to 54.7% believe that it is necessary that a state always monitors and controls media content online in order to stop disinformation and fake news. 36.9% are not aware of the existence of regulatory bodies. 88.1% state that they have never filed a complaint regarding certain media content.

Within UNESCO and EU-funded project, the Montenegro Media Institute developed guidelines for teachers to foster media literacy skills among pupils in primary schools, as the introduction of media literacy, an elective subject of the primary school curriculum in the 2023/24 school year.[8]

Media literacy as an educational tool in North Macedonia[9]

Media literacy plays a crucial role in recognizing and dealing with disinformation. Higher media literacy leads to better recognition and resistance to disinformation. Media literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia is not normatively defined in the educational system, and it remains an open issue when and how it will be introduced in

the country. The legislation covers different aspects of media and information literacy.[10] No subject in education is dedicated only to media literacy. But some parts are studied in several subjects in all years of primary education where media topics are treated from different aspects. Many more elements about the need to introduce media literacy can be found in the strategic documents of the state institutions in the country. Still, here the emphasis is more on information and digital literacy. UNESCO, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe emphasize the importance of media literacy at all levels of education. One of the models for studying media literacy in primary education is the so-called inter-curricular approach, which means the introduction of media literacy in the mother tongue program, particular aspects in other subjects, and extracurricular activities. This model is applied in Slovenia from preschool to higher education in the educational system.

Media literacy as an educational tool in Serbia[11]

Media literacy and education in that context enable students to discern between credible and unreliable sources of information,

[7] https://dfcme.me/en/public-opinion-survey-media-literacy-and-the-citizens-of-montenegro/

[8] https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/nikola-vu%C4%8Devi%C4%87-joins-lets-choose-what-we-watch-campaign

[9] https://respublica-edu-mk.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ranlivost-na-dezinformacii-en.pdf)

[10] https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/unapreduvanje_na_mediumskata_pismenost_izvestaj_final.pdf

[11] https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/serbia/68-media-literacy-and-safe-use-of-new-media

promoting critical thinking. Media literacy empowers students to become active participants in the media landscape rather than passive consumers.

The integration of media literacy in Serbian education faces several challenges, which are not exclusive to Serbia, but are also present in other Western Balkan countries, like limited resources, including outdated technology and a lack of specialized training for teachers, hinder the effective implementation of media literacy programs.

Over the years, there have been several initiatives in Serbia to promote media literacy in education. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development has recognized the importance of media literacy and introduced it into the 2012 National education strategy, by limited incorporation of media literacy into Serbian language, Civic education, and several others. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Center for Media Literacy Serbia, have conducted workshops and training programs for educators to enhance their media literacy skills.

General recommendations

- Introduction of media literacy in primary education through the design, planning and realization of a concept for media literacy in information and computer technology subjects with an emphasis on access, analysis and production of media content.

- Update of primary education curricula and inclusion of topics that will encourage critical thinking of media content, especially on social networks where students are most exposed.

- Empowerment of pupils with skills and knowledge of media literacy and using the media to articulate their own interests as active citizens in society.

- Development of policies for continuous training and education in the field of media literacy of teaching staff in primary education.

- Promotion of cooperation between all stakeholders in society with the aim of promoting media literacy in primary education.

- Harmonization of the legislation in the education policy for the development of media literacy in accordance with European standards and recommendations.

Conclusion

The aim of this cross-sectoral initiative, coming from the grassroots of the Western Balkans youth, is to examine and propose innovative solutions and approaches to

media literacy in education, not just for six countries but the region as a whole.

Learning how to critically analyze media provides students with skills they need when entering college or starting their careers. As digital citizens, we must consistently engage with media content thoughtfully and sceptically. We become informed consumers and ethical contributors in an increasingly interconnected world by equipping ourselves with media literacy tools. With repetition and reinforcement over time, students are able to internalize a checklist of skills for effectively negotiating the global media culture in which they will live all of their lives.

By integrating media literacy into education, many obstacles can be overcome simply by pointing out how to determine the difference between the world of media and the reality surrounding us.