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Media Literacy Education at the University Level: A Case study of the South East European University (SEEU)

Abstract

Media literacy education is the key to creating citizens resilient to fake news and disin-formation, especially in countries vulnerable to foreign influence, such as North Macedonia. The impact of disinformation in the country is higher compared to developed democratic countries. Referring to the highly polarized society, with a weak education system, citizens' low trust in institutions and media as well as average or low level of investigative journalism, it is high time that media literacy should be institutionalized in North Macedonia, particularly at the university level. This study argues that the introduction of media literacy programs and/or courses at the university level is indispensable. The sui generis nature and the unique experience of the South East European University in higher education in North Macedonia, as well as its reputation as a western model of higher education, makes it clearly suitable to be a leader in the institutionalization of media literacy education. Furthermore, it aims to justify the need of including media literacy courses at each faculty at the South East European University, while creating new curricula and/or study programs at the Department of Communication Sciences and Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences. Moreover, the recently established Media Literacy and Disinformation Research Cluster which functions at the Max van der Stoel Research Institute will complement the proposed reform in the curricula of these faculties. The results from the theoretical research and those from empirical research through the online survey with undergraduate and master students further argue that media literacy education is an inevitable need in the digital era that educates university students to critically approach information online, while contributing to creating a resilient society as an ultimate goal.

Keywords:
Media literacy education, South East European University, resilient students

A General Overview

In January 2022, there were 1.75 million internet users in North Macedonia, and the number of social media users was 1.35 million, which is equivalent to 64.8 percent of the total population in the country (Datareportal, 2022) which is 2.08 million.[1]

North Macedonia is a new democracy that declared independence in 1991 as one of the successor states of Yugoslavia. In 2001, it went through an armed conflict between the biggest communities - Macedonians and Albanians - that ended with the support of the US and European mediation. The Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed by both parties with the aim of creating a framework for a civic state. Nevertheless, the society is still significantly divided along ethnic lines, a situation that is also reflected into the information space. The information space in the country is further polarized along political lines, which often coincides with their geostrategic orientation. The biggest geostrategic divide is present among the two largest Macedonian parties (SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE). While SDSM is perceived to be pro-western oriented, because it accelerated the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, the conservative VMRO-DPMNE, during the regime of Nikola Gruevski, had shown a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian attitude, while also the cooperation with China was present. The Albanian political parties en bloc have openly expressed negative attitudes towards Russia and its influence in the country. (GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index, 2021) Bilateral disputes with its neighbors (barring Albania and Kosovo), regarding the name of the country with Greece, regarding the Macedonian identity and language with Bulgaria and about the church with Serbia, have contributed to North Macedonia's vulnerability especially to foreign malign influence from various actors.

The quality of the information space is further impacted by the following factors: the lack of professional and investigative journalists, the presence of one-person portals, lack of study programs at the universities that offer media and communication studies, lack of information and media literacy courses at university and high schools, etc.

This kind of landscape is a favorable ground for all kinds of disinformation and misinformation including campaigns conducted deliberately by actors such as Russia and China, whose aim is to challenge the Western order in the Western Balkans.

Nevertheless, the media landscape in North Macedonia has improved compared to the period before 2017, when media outlets were under total control by the governing party (VMRO-DPMNE). Since then, attempts for free information and free media are continuing, but political parties who daily propagate for the democratic values, fail to implement them and especially when it comes to media freedom, by constraining them to pursue day-to-day politics in their favor. This is also true with the government. Different draft-laws are proposed, some are approved, strategies and plans are created, but surprisingly the process of the same is dragged and delayed. (EU Commission Report on North Macedonia, 2020) The discrepancy of the development of the media freedom after 2017, is also shown by the Media Literacy Index (2021), which was created in 2017 as a response to the 'post-truth' phenomenon, where North Macedonia has been added + 5 scores compared to 2017 and remained with the same scores till then. In 2021, North Macedonia has been ranked in the 35th place out of 35 countries analyzed in this report, where Scandinavian states are the first in the ranking.

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1   The latest official data from the census of 2002 is 2.02 million. The data from the last census held in September 2021 is not available yet.

North Macedonia is the last one compared to neighboring countries in the ranking (Lessenski, M. (2021). Based on most cited research data where the vulnerability to disinformation is often linked to the educational level of a society, this report calls on the emergency for functional education and especially for education in Media Literacy, which will make society more resilient. To a large extent, the process of media literacy has been left at the forefront of civil society, journalists' societies, media self-regulatory organizations, and educational institutions.

The need for Media Literacy in higher education

In the new digital environment, everyone can be the author of i.e., create public convictions, where the lack of filters without a proper editorial office and not respecting the journalistic code raises the risk of misinformation for each individual. Following this trend, educational institutions find it reasonable to do something about it, including theoretical and practical formal education for a critical approach to information.

The need for Media Literacy has been discussed many times, in various conferences and symposia and it has been concluded that Media Literacy is an indisputable need of the time, especially in vulnerable societies such as that of North Macedonia.

With the transformation of the concept of the traditional school, the need arises to follow new forms of learning, turning the university into a "laboratory" where knowledge is transformed into new work practices, much needed in a society with market and production competition. In this context, media education needs to be included in a university curriculum adding not only the basic overview of the general knowledge but also a more synchronized theoretical-practical education for its impact on society. So this is for the fact that it is necessary to critically evaluate the information. There is no one-size-fits-all formula for evaluating false information ... But what assembles all is critical thinking, including detailed analysis and evaluation of the information. According to Astleitner, critical thinking is a mental activity that includes evaluation, suggestions, and judgments that guide the development of beliefs and actions (Astleitner, 2002).

Media Literacy should be seen as a necessary part of our educational-university system, not only for the fact that we are now living in the digital age, but also for the many implications that are being created in everyday life by the spread of "journalism without an editorial", where everyone has the opportunity to influence the creation of media realities. This would make it a good practice to approach the news with skepticism. Something very close to Burkard's psychological approach, according to which, information should be treated in two ways - through acceptance and credibility.

The need to include Media Literacy as a compulsory subject within university curricula should go beyond the administrative-legal meaning, and more as part of the cultural formation of contemporary man (academic citizen) who would achieve that through acquired theoretical-practical knowledge, equipped with the necessary mechanisms for building personal attitudes and views, without necessarily being influenced by the media.

As a controversial topic at the international level, Media Literacy has been selectively included in the school systems of different countries. And, as a notion and content, Media Literacy has been defined since the International Conference (National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, 1992) to mean 'The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and transmit messages through the media.'

It is worth mentioning the idea was initiated in the 1970s by UNESCO on the need for media education. This had also prompted discussions by many scholars to consider the possibility of including media education within the international education system. Moreover, it had produced a Declaration of Media Education in 1982. The Declaration had rendered great service not only to professionals, but also to citizens for media education (Declaration of Media Education, 1982).

The question arises: Why is it necessary to include media literacy in university curricula?! If we make a free interpretation of the scope that Media Literacy would capture, inevitably there will be topics related to the acquisition of creative and critical skills. The definition of media literacy does not leave out the very important component that the media have as a source of information and entertainment, for which one must have knowledge and skills.

North Macedonia is not immune to these challenges, and the Law on Media Education, which would include university education, would be a means of preventing deviations produced by the use of media without criteria. Especially those commercial contents that want to impose non-existent media realities on us.

The case of South East European University

South East European University (SEEU) is a private, public, not for profit higher education institution, consisting of faculties, centers and institutes as its integral parts, specialized in socio-economic sciences. SEEU Faculties are organizational units within the University and operate through the Faculty Council and University policy framework approved by the University Board or Executive Committee. SEEU has five faculties: Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences, as well as a research Institute "Max van der Stoel". The Mission of the University is defined in the Statute. It seeks excellence in teaching and research within the higher education system in the Republic of North Macedonia, by offering equal opportunities for all based on impartiality and merit.

One of the key elements of the mission of the University includes active cooperation with universities in the Republic of North Macedonia as well as with the international universities. The main aim under which the university is governed and managed is to contribute to higher education in the Albanian language, through a mutual interethnic understanding and aims to provide a multilingual and multicultural approach to teaching and research by developing study programs according to broad European and international standards. South East European University is ranked third in the national level among 19 universities of the Republic of North Macedonia. This ranking was carried out by the external evaluator, the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (South East European University, 2022). SEEU is the first university in North Macedonia to obtain the EU Commission's "HR Excellence in Research (HRS4R)" badge (Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R), 2015).

Faculty of Languages, Cultures & Communications

The modern discipline of communications is well represented in the Faculty of Languages, Cultures & Communications, providing extensive course offerings for those interested in media studies, cultural relations, political and social analysis, journalism and public relations. The students are offered the study program of International Communications at the Department of Communications, which includes dynamic, interactive, and interdisciplinary studies. This study program generates professional results adapted to the needs of the global integrative market. Under the structural reform, which is foreseen to take place at the department, a new study program 'Media and the investigative journalism' is expected to be established, while an audio-visual lab has been already set up at the department for the purposes of the new study program.

Max van der Stoel Institute (MVDSI)

The overall research activity at the university is carried out by the Max van der Stoel Institute (MVDSI), which is a scientific institute within South East European University, focusing on inter-disciplinary fields of social sciences and information and communication technologies. Established as a scientific-academic unit of the university on March 2012, Max van der Stoel Institute was named after the former OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Max van der Stoel (1924-2011) who used to be very active in the region with his diplomatic efforts on conflict prevention and as one of the main initiators for establishing the South East European University in North Macedonia. The Institute's key activity is research (development and implementation of the research projects). The institute includes the following research groups: Distributed Systems and Data Science Group (DSG), Social Sciences Group (SSG) and Environment and Health Group (EHG) (Max van der Stoel Institute, 2022).

Media Literacy & Disinformation Research Cluster (MeDisInfo)

In 2019, the Media Literacy & Disinformation Research Cluster (MeDisInfo) was created as part of the Social Sciences Research Group at the Max van der Stoel Institute. This cluster consists of SEEU experts in the field of media, communication, journalism, information technology, international relations and diplomacy, and security studies with the aim of addressing the issue of the impact of fake news and disinformation on the security of the Western Balkan. MeDisInfo is also an active member of the Media Literacy Network of North Macedonia, contributing to a stronger collaboration with other members in the country in activities like attending regional conferences and other type of collaboration.

Many research activities, including collaborative projects and activities for our students have taken place so far. For instance, as part of the activities of the UNESCO World Media Literacy Week, marked in North Macedonia as Media Literacy Days, held from 22-29 November 2021, our research cluster organized a debate with students on the topic: "Generation 5.0: Should we believe in everything we read on the internet?". For the same occasion MeDisInfo research team prepared a leaflet for students with glossary and instructions that will help them detect fake news and get acquainted with the basic concepts of media literacy and disinformation. The leaflet was distributed to the high school students in the Tetovo and other high schools throughout the western part of North Macedonia.

One of the major research projects is Fakespotting. It is an Erasmus+ project on digital and information literacy, implemented by a consortium led by Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna, Italy. The project will be implementing brand new tools for innovation in higher education and adult education, allowing the deployment of original digital and information literacy contents, assessments and toolkits tackling skills mismatches, to prepare students and low-skilled adults for jobs where shortages exist or are emerging. Digital Information literacy is directly related to the individual's employability, to get employed and to stay in employment or to move on in the workplace. PIAAC indicates that 20 to 25 % of European adults aged 16 to 65 with low levels of proficiency in digital information literacy face higher risk of unemployment and social exclusion. A cross-cutting need in the digital labor market is to close the digital gender gap. In the EU fewer than one in five ICT professionals are female. The criticalities heavily affect also the democratic participation of European citizens as digital literacy is totally related to the capacity to spot disinformation. Other project partners are: Loyola University of Andalusia and Incoma in Spain, Globsec and Matej Bel University in Slovakia, University of Tirana in Albania, Novi Sad School of Journalism in Serbia and Pagella Politica in Italy. The project will end in 2023 (Fakespotting, 2021). MeDisInfo is actively working in establishing the network with various local, regional and international actors working in this field as well as enhancing the existing ones.

Media Literacy and Disinformation Research Cluster will play a leading role given its expertise in the field, and thus will complement the proposed reform in the curricula of the SEEU faculties.

The methodology

The research strategy employed in this study is a mixed-method –approach which is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods. The theoretical part of the study consists of literature review, including various reports on the field of media freedom and media literacy nationwide. In addition, an overview of the political and media landscape in North Macedonia and the need of introducing media literacy in a higher education institution were examined. After reviewing the literature on the necessity of adding a Media Literacy course at the university level, the attitude and perception of students for including the Media Literacy course as an obligatory and elective course in each Faculty of South East European University (SEEU) were tested.

The quantitative method has been used for testing the research question raised, by developing a self – completion - questionnaire, administering a closed-ended online survey of undergraduate and master students in South East European University from all faculties. The survey was designed with twelve closed questions and one open question which served us to get more accurate feedback about the perception and attitudes of the students regarding the Media Literacy course at the university level.

The questionnaire comprised a total of 13 questions, which were organized within three thematic blocks: A) General information of the participants (gender, level of studies, year of studies, and faculty), B) frequency of the internet use and attitude for fake news in social media, C) Attitude for Media Literacy course in university curricula.

The survey was distributed internally through institutional group email in Albanian and Macedonian language, and the questions were of a structural nature: dichotomous Questions, multiple-choice questions, scaling questions: Likert scale questions, and open questions. Findings and results regarding the principle of transparency, participation, and efficiency were respected.

Findings/results

The age target was divided into two age groups 18-23 and 24-35, undergraduate and master students from all faculties of South East European University. The sample generated 68.2 percent, respondents, from the first group, and 31.8 percent of respondents from the second group, respectively the highest number of respondents are the first-year students of undergraduate studies (36.4 percent), followed by the first-year students of master studies with 22.7 percent. This questionnaire had more than a half, male respondents with 59.1 percent, rather than female respondents with 40.9 percent.

Regarding testing the attitude of all students of South East European University, we have employed a question for detecting their affiliation to a certain faculty, since we foresaw that not all the students might see Media Literacy as a necessary course in their faculty, depending on the field of study. We generated the highest responses with the same percent (31.8) from the Faculty of Languages, Cultures, and Communication and the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies, followed by the Faculty of Business and Economics with 18.2 percent, and with the same percent (9.1) of respondents from the Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law.
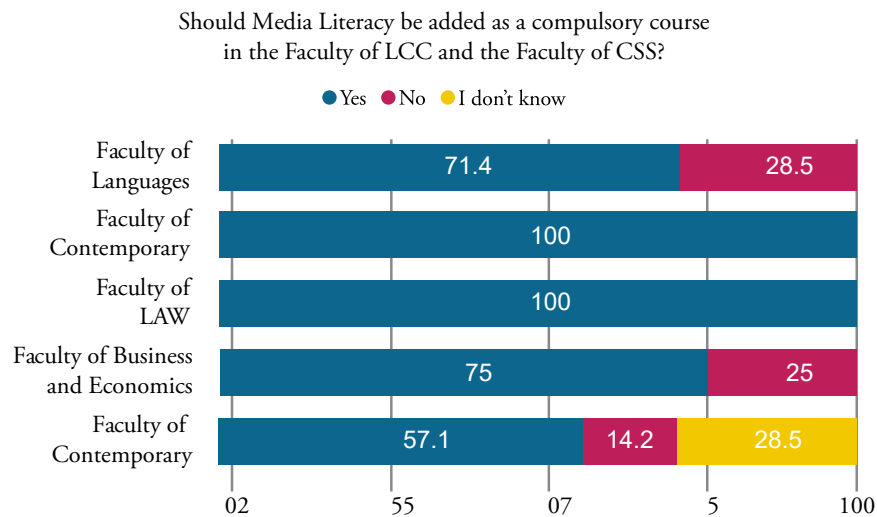
In order to determine the time spent online by students who think media education is necessary in university curricula, was employed a question for the frequency of their time spend online and an option of three answers was possible: Less than 2 hours a day, 2-7 hours per day and more than 7 hours a day. Most of the respondents (54.5 percent) spend 2.7 hours per day online.

The most used online media by the students is Instagram (81.8 percent), followed by Facebook (54.5 percent), Snapchat (40.9 percent), Linkedin (36.4 percent), Tiktok (18.2 percent) and Twitter (9.1 percent). According to students' perception, more than 89 percent think there is a great deal of fake news circulating on the Internet.

Our research enquiry would get a confirmation through student's response of the question whether they think that a Media Literacy course should be added in university curricula as an elective course. Based on the general responses, most of the students - almost 70 percent think that media literacy course should be added as an elective course in each faculty, whereas 27 percent answered that they don't know, and 4.5 percent answered 'No' to this question. The following chart presents answers form each faculty in percent, where we can assume that almost all faculty students think that a Media literacy course should be added as an elective course in all the faculties.

Should Media Literacy be an elective course in all SEEU faculties?

● Yes ● No ● I don't know
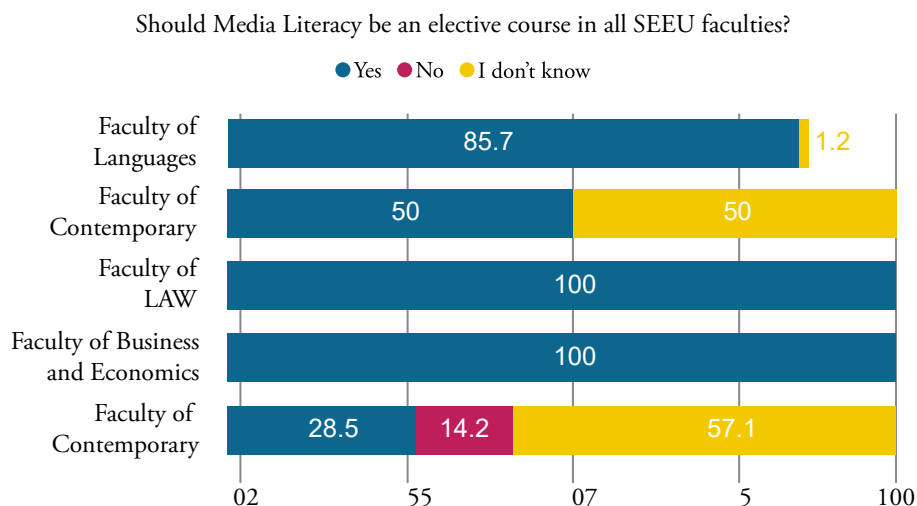
Unlike the previous question, the following question seeks to understand whether students think that the Media literacy course should be obligatory for the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications same as for the Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences. The total of 63.6 percent think that this course should be obligatory, whereas if we analyze the answers in each faculty, results in more than a half of the students of each faculty think that this course should be obligatory in these two faculties (see the graph below for more details in percent).

Should Media Literacy be added as a compulsory course
in the Faculty of LCC and the Faculty of CSS?

● Yes ● No ● I don't know

Faculty			
Faculty of Languages	71.4	28.5	
Faculty of Contemporary	100		
Faculty of LAW	100		
Faculty of Business and Economics	75	25	
Faculty of Contemporary	57.1	14.2	28.5

02   55   07   5   100

Additionally, students were asked if they would choose Media Literacy as an elective course at the faculty where they study, and 72.2 percent answered that they would choose the course as elective, 18.2 answered they 'don't know' and 9.1 percent answered they wouldn't choose the course as elective. If we analyze the answers from each faculty separately, we would see that three faculties would entirely choose the Media Literacy course as elective during their studies. High percentage of the students that would choose the Media Literacy course as elective are Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, Faculty of Business and Economics, and Faculty of Law. The lowest percentage - if we compare with other faculties, but significantly high of 42.8 percent - are the students from the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies that would choose Media Literacy course as elective.

The purpose of the next question is to see the students' readiness to be trained in digital skills for critical approach to the internet. The results showed that most of the students, almost 78 percent, proved that they are willing to be trained for digital skills to critically approach the internet.

During your studies, would you like to have the opportunity
to develop digital skills for critical access on the internet?

● Yes ● No ● I don't know

9.1%

13.6%

77.3%
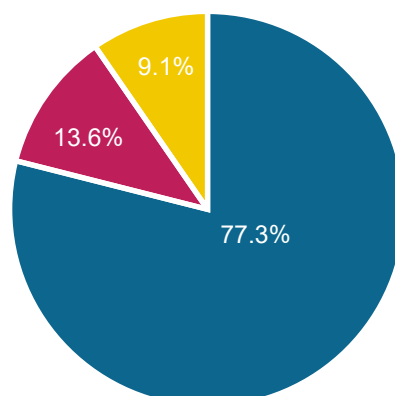
For the comprehensive analysis of this paper, students were asked to give their opinion on Media Literacy as a new subject in the university curriculum. The answers are very intriguing and enable additional analysis for their perception and willingness to consider Media Literacy not only as the most necessary subject in the curriculum, but also as their essential skill in everyday life. In addition, the following students' comments prove this finding:

> 'Everything we learn and will learn about the media is important'

> 'I think it would be a very practical subject for our society.'

> 'Thank you for the opportunity to answer the questions. Media education is more critical for the time in which we are living, because the media today have an unprecedented dynamic compared to previous years. Therefore, universities should be the first to orient and raise the awareness of students about such dynamics, which can often get out of control.'

Discussion

According to Bulger et al. (2018) modern efforts to build media literacy often involve five mainstays: "youth participation, teacher training and curricular resources, parental support, policy initiatives, and evidence base construction." All of the above are at the same time the pillars upon which the higher education stands. Thus, the universities' mission in contributing to societal resilience would be making sure that all of these preconditions are priorly met.

Based on our findings, most of the students of the South East European University are convinced that there are a lot of fake news and disinformation circulating on the Internet. Given their response to the usage of social media, and their time spent on the internet (2 – 7 hours a day – 54.5 percent of the respondents) we can straightforwardly draw a conclusion which speaks about their great awareness about the presence of fake news and disinformation online, and their willingness to expand knowledge and advance skills for detecting fake news and disinformation through the proposed Media Literacy course. This assertion is further supported by students' answers - 72.2 percent of the students answered that they would choose Media Literacy course as an elective during their studies. This high percentage of students' responses confirms our assumption that the cultural and educational space that prepares new generations in the spirit of technological transformations in the media makes it easier to prevent the negative impact of the media.

The new age challenges of information transformation in the last decade have developed the need for the youth to be trained, particularly on how to approach the internet critically, enrich them with necessary skills to adapt to the digital age and become resilient to the huge presence of disinformation in the online sphere. This is especially important for the transition countries such as North Macedonia, where the Media Literacy Index report calls on the emergency for functional education and especially for education in Media Literacy. Most of the students of the South East European University, almost 78 percent, showed that they are willing to be equipped with the digital skill education that would help them to critically access the internet.

The immediate need of intervention, namely, the need for Media Literacy has reached a level that is not seen as a necessity only by students and professionals in the field, but also by other individuals relevant in the field. Hence, most of the students - almost 70 percent - think that a media literacy course should be added as an elective course in each faculty, whereas analyzed in each faculty separately, we can assume that almost all faculty students think that a Media literacy course should be added as an elective course in all the faculties. Remarkably, the majority of students who think that a Media Literacy course should be added as an elective course in each faculty are the students who study at the Law Faculty and at the Faculty of Business and Economics.

The need for the inclusion of Media Literacy as a compulsory subject within university curricula is of a great importance, as it contributes also to the cultural formation of the contemporary academic citizen prepared for the unpredictable future world. The Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication and the Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences within the South East European University should be first among faculties where Media Literacy courses should be introduced as an obligatory course. The total of 63.6 percent of the students in South East European University think that a Media Literacy course should be obligatory in these two faculties. These figures are encouraging, as they totally coincide with our claim that Media Literacy is of a particular importance for future graduates who will work as journalists, media professionals, political scientists, social workers, language teachers, but not excluding the private and the public sector.

A student with established knowledge of Media Literacy would be equipped with several skills that are directly related to the functioning and objectives of the media: technical (enables access to media), critical (understanding media content, training in their interpretation and critical evaluation), and practical (ability to understand media messages).

According to this basic experience, the student will be able to analyze the media from several aspects: harmful media content (violence, advertising, pornography), media influence and harmful content, regulation, and self-regulation (conventions, legal frameworks, and journalistic codes of ethics, and advertisers), then new technologies and their social role, industrialization of information, culture and entertainment, interactive communication, new media genres, such as blogs, etc.

Given the highly adaptable and transformative nature towards new trends, and the academic and research infrastructure of the university, the students of the South East European University, not accidentally accept and praise an initiative to add a new course for Media Literacy in the South East European University. One of the students of South East European University considers media education as very critical for the time in which we are living, because the media today have an unprecedented dynamic compared to previous years. Therefore, he/she says that 'universities should be the first to orient and raise the awareness of students about such dynamics'.

Conclusions

The sui generis nature and the unique experience of the South East European University in higher education in North Macedonia, as well as its reputation as a western model of higher education, makes it clearly suitable to be a leader in the institutionalization of media literacy education.

The findings from this research justify the need of including media literacy as an elective course at each faculty at the South East European University, while mandatory for the students studying at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication and Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences.

The Media Literacy and Disinformation Research Cluster, which functions at the Max van der Stoel Research Institute will complement the proposed reform in the curricula of these faculties.

The results from the theoretical research and those from empirical research through the online survey with undergraduate and master students further argue that media literacy education is an inevitable need in the digital era that educates university students to critically access the information online while contributing to creating a resilient society as an ultimate goal.

Limitations and future research

Future research may also include a qualitative research approach for wide-ranging results, in order to identify clearly the perception and attitudes for a Media Literacy course in support of the survey. Also, a wider group of SEEU professors and Ph.D. students would have made the validation of the research question more reliable. Repetition of the distribution of the survey in different periods and distribution of the survey for a longer time would generate more responses from students. For a better understanding of the role of Media Literacy in creating resilient citizens, future research that involves other focus groups such as high school students will be of major interest for the authors.

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