Media literacy – needs and challenges in the education of youth

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Abstract

Human progress has ushered in the digital age, an era in which we must all learn to navigate rationally. We swim in a sea of information that reaches us every single day. From birth, we enter the media ether. In this digital era, everyone can publish, making it increasingly difficult to find the truth without proper education. Never before have young people interacted with media in this way. Therefore, if they are already in a situation where they spend so much time consuming media and receiving information from it, they must understand how media works, how it impacts their lives, and how to create media content correctly and effectively. It is especially important to raise children's awareness of the types of information, how to differentiate between them, how information travels, and the effects media have on their lives. They need to be trained to think critically and make rational decisions, because they themselves are a medium. Today, a variety of entertainment, informational, and educational content blends images, videos, words, and sounds. From an early age, children need skills to help them understand, evaluate, and use these messages. Critical thinking is the most important skill for becoming media literate, and it is a prerequisite for making sound decisions in all spheres of social life. Therefore, as teachers, we face a tremendous challenge: to train students, through playful activities and problem-solving situations, to use media safely and successfully adapt to the digital age, because they are the driving force behind our country's progress.

Keywords: media, news, information, youth, social media, fake news, internet

1. Introduction

Media literacy, a relatively new social concept, stems from the need to encourage critical and analytical thinking and develop civic awareness. In this context, it involves building knowledge for the critical evaluation and independent creation of media messages. Democratic societies must embed the right to freedom of speech and access to information as a prerequisite for civic expression and active citizenship. However, only media- and digitally literate citizens can meaningfully participate in locating, exchanging, using, and creating information.

Modern social life involves the daily use of media and new information technologies, along with the constant acquisition of new skills for wise, rational, ethical, and effective use in learning, research, communication, and entertainment. Media literacy therefore encompasses the competence for critical analysis, evaluation, and independent creation of media messages.

Young people receive a large number of messages every day and are often unable to tell true from false news. This is a problem because society needs a media-literate youth capable of differentiating between types of information and thinking critically and independently.

1.1. What is media literacy?

Media literacy is the ability to critically analyze, evaluate, and create media content in different formats (video, text, audio, images). It includes understanding the role of media in society and developing a critical approach to information.

Media literacy means being able to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content in various forms, and ultimately act upon or use that content.

It is particularly important for young people, who are exposed daily to vast amounts of information from different sources. Ideally, it would be part of formal education. However, in North Macedonia, young people encounter media literacy primarily through non-formal education.

The technological landscape has evolved rapidly in recent years, with social media now playing a central role in young people's lives. Social media brings significant new challenges but also exciting opportunities. Research is beginning to uncover how specific experiences on social platforms can affect young people's mental health.

2. Social Networks and Interaction with Media

2.1. What is a social network?

A social network is an online platform that allows users to communicate, share information, and create and maintain relationships with others. It is a place where you can post photos, videos, texts, and comments, follow other users, and participate in different groups or communities.

Some well-known examples include:

- Facebook – connect with friends and family, share statuses, photos, and events.
- Instagram – focused on sharing photos and videos.
- Twitter/X – uses short posts ("tweets") to share opinions, news, and more.
- TikTok – a video platform for sharing short, often humorous or creative clips.
- LinkedIn – a professional network for career, business, and networking.

The idea behind all of them is connection—whether personal, professional, or creative.

Never before have young people been in such constant interaction with the media. If they are already spending large amounts of time with media and receiving information from it, they must understand how media functions, how it affects their lives, and how to produce media content correctly and effectively.

Someone considered "literate" in the online world shapes their personality, social behavior, and worldview through various tools for collaboration and information management. The vast amount of information available on computer screens, mobile phones, magazines, and newspapers is broadcast through the digital ether. These messages are mediated, and people are flooded with them daily. Young people in particular face great difficulty determining what is true and what is not.

In this digital era, where anyone can publish, it is becoming harder to find the truth without proper education. Media literacy opens the door to fuller and more creative engagement in the online (and offline) media world. It also incorporates other forms of literacy—linguistic (reading and writing), audiovisual (visual literacy), and digital or information literacy. The concept of media literacy continues to evolve alongside communication platforms and new media. It is a tool for protecting citizens—especially young people—an educational instrument, and a means for active participation in the media sphere.

The impact of media messages does not always correspond to the creator's intent, and it is not the same for all audiences. Some will interpret a message one way, others differently. The unlimited possibilities for creating and transmitting media messages

have enabled the uncontrolled and unsanctioned spread of false and manipulative content, hate speech, and incitement to violence. In this sea of information, it has become difficult to judge what is good and what is harmful—hence the need for media literacy to help us make sound decisions.

3. The Macedonian Context

Online media and social networks are overflowing with diverse, engaging, and exciting content. The Internet is an excellent way to connect with friends and family, stay informed about the world, learn new skills, share photos, videos, and opinions. When used properly, it can transform the lives of children and young people by connecting them to a whole world of opportunities for communication, learning, and freedom of expression.

However, the Internet is also misused daily, often for harmful purposes—and children and young people are the ones who pay the price.

Now that we are aware of both the benefits and the challenges of online environments, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of using safe and secure spaces for online learning. Protecting children on the Internet depends on multiple factors, including active knowledge-building about emerging threats and challenges. Both parents and teachers play a key role in this process.

Young people today must be equipped to use technology skillfully to access the information they need—and, more importantly, to recognize and select the right information from the overwhelming volume available. This means that traditional literacy (reading, writing, arithmetic) has now expanded to include digital literacy.

Media literacy among young people remains a serious challenge in North Macedonia and requires substantial work. Critical thinking among youth is of particular importance in every country. Young people often want to be informed quickly, without checking the accuracy of each piece of news. This rush to accumulate information can lead to misconceptions and distorted perceptions on various topics.

It is evident that Macedonian media can mislead readers with just a few sentences taken out of context—allowing outlets to profit while readers end up with false information. All stakeholders in society must be part of the solution, starting with education that teaches young people to form their own opinions and verify every news item. Literacy for the 21st century introduces a new set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for a successful and high-quality life.

4. Literature Review

Digital technologies have become a universal feature of young people's lives. Screen exposure starts early—children in the U.S. under the age of two spend an average of 42 minutes per day with screen media. By adolescence, most are fully immersed in a world of smartphones, computers, and social media. Recent nationally representative statistics suggest that 95% of adolescents aged 13–18 in the U.S. have access to a smartphone, and 88% have access to a desktop or laptop computer at home.

UNESCO (2021) actively promotes Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

Its research on global media literacy stresses that information today is power, and that "citizens must be able to recognize misinformation, propaganda, and bias in the media."

Pew Research Center (USA, 2019) found that only 26% of American adults are able to identify fake news. Most people struggle to distinguish credible sources from manipulative ones.

EU Kids Online (2020), a European study, shows that young internet users often do not verify the sources of the information they share. Children and adolescents are susceptible to influencers and commercial messages, often without recognizing sponsored content.

Ofcom Report (UK, 2023) notes that 30% of young people believe they are media literate, but in practice demonstrate limited critical thinking skills. Only 15% can accurately explain how algorithms influence their news feed content.

Macedonian Context – UNDP & Ministry of Education and Science (2022):

A study on media literacy in North Macedonia found that only 12% of respondents know how to verify information using multiple sources. Teachers and professors require additional training to pass this knowledge on to students.

Over 400 children and young people in North Macedonia participated in a UNICEF U-Report online safety survey in 2023. One in three respondents (31%) reported experiencing online bullying. Many (18%) admitted that a lack of knowledge on how to stay safe online is one reason why cyberbullying persists, while 41% felt that institutions do not take it seriously enough.

The first steps toward media literacy in the Macedonian media sphere were taken with the adoption of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in 2013, which mentioned the term for the first time—though without defining it. A few years earlier (2009–2011), the Macedonian Institute for Media was the first NGO to open the topic through research, the preparation of a teacher's manual for primary and secondary education, and various training activities.

Critical thinking among youth remains vital. The tendency to consume information quickly—without verifying its accuracy—leads to misperceptions. Macedonian media continue to exploit this through out-of-context statements that attract clicks and profit, at the expense of truthful reporting. Embedding media literacy in education has long been established practice across Europe and the world.

5. Research Methodology

The primary source of data for this study was a survey distributed to students in various schools. The questionnaire contained a combination of closed and open-ended questions, allowing for a detailed analysis of different aspects related to the need for media literacy and the protection of young people's digital identities.

The survey was intended for students (Appendix 1). It included 90 respondents aged 10 to 14 from primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The data obtained were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods of text analysis. This involved identifying themes and trends in participants' answers, as well as analyzing the frequency of certain expressions and concepts. The research methodology aimed to provide an in-depth examination of the topic and deliver relevant and meaningful results that could contribute to improving education through the integration of digital media into teaching. It also sought to offer guidelines and suggestions for more responsible use of digital media and social networks, emphasizing the importance of individual critical thinking.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The general section of the survey collected demographic information, including gender and place of residence. The survey was conducted electronically and was completely anonymous to protect participants' privacy.

Of all respondents, 62.5% were female and 37.5% were male, indicating a predominance of female participants. Regarding place of residence, 60.9% lived in rural areas, while 39.1% lived in urban areas, showing that the research primarily included students from rural communities.

Most frequently used media among respondents:

- Social networks – 57.5%
- Television – 55%
- YouTube – 55%

- Internet websites – 37.5%
- Radio – 15%
- Newspapers/magazines – 10%

These results show that social networks are the leading medium, consistent with trends among youth, and suggest a shift toward digital sources of information and away from traditional media.

Time spent online:

- Less than 1 hour: 27.5%
- 1–2 hours: 20%
- More than 3 hours: 52%

This indicates that young people are exposed to a vast amount of information daily, making it increasingly difficult to determine the origin and credibility of that information.

Educational activities on distinguishing true from false information:

- Often: 32.5%
- Sometimes: 47.5%
- Rarely: 12.5%
- Never: 7.5%

These responses show that there is effort within the education system to foster critical thinking, and most students report at least occasional discussions on these topics—a positive sign.

Importance of media literacy in school curricula:

- Yes: 70%
- No: 15%
- Don't know: 15%

This high level of interest points to increased awareness among young people about the risks and dangers of the digital world they inhabit.

Greatest perceived risks when using media:

- Cyberbullying – 69%
- Fake information – 61.9%

- Internet addiction – 28.6%
- Other – 7.1%

Cyberbullying is seen as the most serious threat, underscoring the need for focused education on this issue.

Most common forms of cyberbullying reported:

- Offensive comments – 77.5%
- Spreading false rumors – 70.4%
- Exclusion from group chats – 28.9%

What students want to learn about media:

- How to protect themselves
- How to recognize false information
- How to use the internet safely
- How media works

A small number expressed no interest in learning about media.

Negative experiences online:

Most students reported no bad experiences, though some mentioned exposure to games with offensive content, violence, or inappropriate behavior.

Preferred activities to improve media literacy:

- Projects – 54.5%
- Workshops – 42.4%
- Lectures – 42.4%
- Regular classes – 39.4%

Media literacy is now more than ever an essential part of daily life. Media messages are “packaged” and delivered in ways that, without media literacy and education, appear “natural” and objective. With the rise of new media (internet, mobile phones, etc.), individuals have gained new spaces for self-expression. Virtual identity, in every sense, is a form of self-representation, and media content plays a major role in shaping perceptions of oneself, others, and the world. Building the most accurate possible picture requires media literacy.

7. Recommendations for Improving Youth Media Literacy

Integration into Education:

- Introduce media literacy as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools.

Teacher Training:

- Provide professional development programs for teachers to effectively teach media literacy.

Creation of Resources:

- Develop tailored materials and tools to help students identify and counter misinformation.

Promotion of Critical Thinking:

- Encourage activities that develop critical thinking and the ability to analyze media content.

Project-Based and Research-Based Learning

How?

- Students independently research specific topics such as “How does fake news spread?” or “How can I protect myself from cyberbullying?”.
- End products may include presentations, videos, or podcasts.

Example:

A school might form a mini-journalism team where students produce news stories and verify facts.

Use of Digital Tools and Resources

How?

- Utilize online platforms and simulators (e.g., Checkology, News Literacy Project).
- Employ games and quizzes for fact-checking practice.
- Analyze TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube content within a teaching context.

Example:

Students compare how the same news story is covered by a traditional news outlet versus a TikTok influencer.

Tips for Making the Internet a Safer Space

- Remember that every time we go online, we leave a digital footprint. Once something is published, it cannot be taken back.
- Share carefully.
- Ask for permission before sharing someone else's photo or video.
- What you do online can have real-world consequences.
- Never share personal information such as your address, phone number, bank account details, or passwords.
- Personal privacy and security are just as important online as offline. Protecting key information helps prevent harm to devices, reputations, and relationships.
- Stop the spread of harmful or false messages by not forwarding them to others.
- It starts with you—don't spread rumors, and don't share content aimed at hurting or humiliating someone. What may seem like an innocent joke to you can deeply hurt someone else.
- If you're concerned about your safety or something that has happened to you online, talk immediately to a trusted adult.
- Understand that people and situations online are not always what they seem. Learning to tell what is real from what is fake is a crucial safety skill.
- Communicate with others according to the principle: treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Good manners do not change simply because you are communicating through a screen.
- Be aware that online "friends" may not be who they claim to be.
- Never send malicious messages online—whether via email, chat, or messaging apps like Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, or ICQ.

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Annex – Student Questionnaire

Topic: Media Literacy – Needs and Challenges in Primary Education

Dear Students,

This survey aims to understand your opinions and experiences with using media (television, internet, social networks, newspapers, etc.) and how your school helps you distinguish accurate from inaccurate information. Your answers will be used only for research purposes and will remain completely anonymous. Thank you for your honesty!

1. Gender

o Male

o Female

2. Place of residence

o Urban

o Rural

3. Which media do you use most often? (You can choose more than one)

o Television

o Internet websites

o Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.)

o YouTube

o Newspapers/magazines

o Radio

o Other: _____

4. How much time do you spend online each day?

o Less than 1 hour

o 1–2 hours

o 3–4 hours

o More than 4 hours

5. Does your school teach you how to distinguish true from false information?

o Yes

o No

o Not sure

6. Do your teachers talk to you about safe internet and social media use?

o Often

o Sometimes

o Rarely

o Never

7. Do you think it is important to learn about media literacy in school?

o Yes

o No

o Don’t know

8. What do you think is the biggest danger when using media?

o Fake information (disinformation)

o Cyberbullying

o Internet addiction

o Other: _____

9. What would you like to learn about media at school?

10. Have you had any negative experiences with the internet or social media? If you want, you can share:

11. Would you like more activities related to media in your classes (videos, projects, discussions)?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

12. Which types of learning activities do you think would improve your media literacy?

- Workshops
- Lectures
- Regular classes
- Projects

About the author

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Primary school teacher at Ss. Naum of Ohrid – village of Peštani, Ohrid. She has worked on various projects aimed at developing and encouraging empathy among students, and has served as coordinator of an international eco-project to raise students' awareness about climate change. In 2020, as an eTwinning Ambassador, she participated in a number of international projects that received European Quality Labels and conducted training sessions for teachers. She is a certified trainer in Media Literacy and an EDUINO educator.