



EUROPEAN SAFE ONLINE INITIATIVE

INTRODUCTION

Mediatization is a term that invokes the ubiquity and pervasiveness of media in the contemporary world. From the macro-institutions that structure society to the nooks and crannies of our everyday lives, media have become an omnipresent element. As our lives go online and time spent in front of screens increases, there is no doubt that the information society is changing the way we live and interact and, consequently presenting new challenges to our core values. New media are driving new practices that are profoundly affecting almost any aspect of the social, economic, cultural and political life and learning.

The more pervasive the role of the new media in modern society, the more it is imperative to identify and manage the development of the skills and the abilities to use them. Thus, media literacy is a field that has grown rapidly in recent years, both in the academic and the policy discourses, and which will become even more important in the future, as “new” media – notably digital communications, the internet and mobile telephony – become almost universal.

MEDIA LITERACY AS A EUROPEAN UNION PRIORITY

At the European Union level, media literacy is a top priority. The European Parliament and the European Commission identify media literacy as an important component of building and sustaining democracy. Over the past decade the European Commission has been moving steadily towards the formulation of a binding policy on media literacy. The European Approach to Media Literacy in the Digital Environment (European Commission 2007) and the Recommendation on Media Literacy in the Digital Environment for a More Competitive Audio-visual and Content Industry and an Inclusive Knowledge Society (European Commission 2009) can be seen as guideposts in this attempt¹.

The European Commission asserts that “Media Literacy is a matter of inclusion and citizenship in today’s Information Society [...] Media literacy is today regarded as one of the key prerequisites for an active and full citizenship in order to prevent and reduce the risks of exclusion from community life²”. The very concept of media literacy has switched from being a mere option to be a core part of a wider Citizenship Education, as mentioned by the Information Society and Media Commissioner of the European Commission:

“In a digital era, media literacy is crucial for achieving full and active citizenship. [...] The ability to read and write – or traditional literacy – is no longer sufficient in this day and age. [...] Everyone (old and young) needs to get to grips with the new digital world in which we live. For this, continuous information and education is more important than regulation.³”

¹ Fraus-Meigs, Divina, Velez, Irma and Michel Julieta Flores (2017). Public Policies in Media and Information Literacy in Europe: Cross-Country Comparisons. New York: Routledge.

² Commission Recommendation of 20 August 2009 on media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audio-visual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society. OJ L 227, 29.08.2009. p. 9-12.

³ European Commission (2007). Media Literacy: Do People Really Understand how to Make the Most of Blogs, Search Engines of Interactive TV? [Press Release]. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-07-1970_en.htm?locale=en.

A higher degree of media literacy can significantly contribute towards achieving the objectives set for the Paris Declaration⁴. In this same context, more recently, the Council of the European Union recommends the continuous implementation of “the commitments of the Paris Declaration through enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of the internet and social media, so as to raise awareness of risks related to the reliability of information sources and to help exercise sound judgement⁵”.

Three main reasons, deeply interlinked, explain the increased EC interest in the topic of media literacy:

- Media literacy is intrinsic to a healthy democracy.
- Media literacy is a necessary response to the changing and increasingly complex media landscape.
- Media literacy is an element in the fight against radicalization and respect and promotion of fundamental

rights.⁶

The European Commission understands media literacy as “as an umbrella expression that includes all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access the media, to have a critical understanding of the media and to interact with it⁷”. According to the European Commission, all these capacities enable citizens to participate in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society, as well as to play an active role in the democratic processes. “Media” is to be understood in a broad way, including all kind of media [television, radio, press, digital information outlets] and through all kinds of channels [offline and online]⁸. This definition provides the basis for all EU actions and initiatives on an EU level.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Technological advances – mobile computing, augmented reality, blogs, social networks, and other modes of connectivity – are producing new media well beyond conventional print and broadcast. People have increased access to information, and opportunities to express ideas, to communicate and to make sense of their worlds through these new media. In classrooms and informal learning environments, these new media are expanding and challenging notions of learning and literacy. In view both of the changing way of the use of the media and the enormous volume of information we get, the issue of children and young peoples’ ability to “access the media, to have a critical understanding of the media and to interact with it” is of great significance, as an important component for active citizenship in today’s information society. Within this context, parents struggle in supporting the active citizenship and the opportunities these technologic advances can provide to their children, whilst keeping them safe online and educating them towards a responsible use of these online media.

The focus of the EUROPEAN SAFEONLINE INITIATIVE is the improvement of media literacy levels among children and young people through the extensive media literacy education of their parents in SafeOnline project which will take place from January 2020 to January 2022 for the duration of 36 months. Instead of attempting the development of a pilot experimentation project, the EUROPEAN SAFEONLINE project proposes the scaling up of a recognized and proven innovation in the field of media literacy. More specifically, the EUROPEAN SAFEONLINE project aims at the replication of a practice in the field of media literacy that has demonstrable results with qualitative and quantitative evidence of impact; that of the Flemish SafeOnline programme. For a number of years, the Flemish SafeOnline Training initiative has successfully achieved the goal of improving the media literacy levels of parents by developing their knowledge and skillset on the new media are being used daily by their children. Through the Flemish SafeOnline Training Initiative, thousands of parents have increased their understanding of and improved their response towards the opportunities and risks of online activities and, in their turn, they have supported their children in understanding the possibilities and challenges of these new media and new literacies.

⁴ European Union Education Ministers (2015). Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination through Education. Informal meeting of European Union Education Ministers Paris, Tuesday 17 March 2015. https://eu2015.lv/images/notikumi/2015-3-10_Declaration_EN.pdf.

⁵ European Commission (2018) Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching (2018/C195/01). Brussels.

⁶ Mari, Sol Pérez Guevara (2017). EU Policy and Actions Related to Media Literacy, pp. 19 - 28 in Wadbring, Ingela and Pekkala, Lars. (eds.) Citizens in a Mediated World: A Nordic-Baltic Perspective on Media and Information Literacy. Göteborg: Exacta Print.

⁷ European Commission (2018). Media Literacy for All. Belgium: Brussels

⁸ European Commission (2007). Media Literacy for all. Belgium: Brussels.

The Flemish SafeOnline Training Initiative will be replicated in the following five (5) other territories and/or national contexts that of:

- the French-speaking part of Belgium [the Walloon Region]
- Romania,
- Bulgaria,
- Greece, and
- Cyprus.

The EUROPEAN SAFEONLINE project which brings together key stakeholders in the area of media literacy can act as a catalyst to foster the scaling-up across regions and countries of one of the most successful European practices in the field of media literacy; a practice, that has received a number of awards and distinctions – both on a European and a national level – due to its distinct ability to bring about impressive results in the advancement of media literacy levels.

RELEVANCE TO THE GENERAL AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE CALL

Thus, the EUROPEAN SAFEONLINE project addresses:

[1]. General Objective 1 of the Call since it proposes the “dissemination and/or scaling up [of a] good practice in inclusive learning initiated in particular at local level” and

[2]. Specific Objective 3 of the Call which focuses on “enhancing critical thinking and media literacy among learners, parents and educational staff”.

of the Call “Social Inclusion and Common Values: The Contribution in the Field of Education and Training” (EACEA/21/2018) of Key Action 3: Support for Policy Reform.

THE EUROPEAN RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT

It is inevitable that Europe is at the forefront of the discipline of media literacy. Historically, Europe has served as a cradle of media civilization, as well as a focus for the coordination of debate, criticism, and unchecked invention. Europe has been at the center of the philosophical, literary and technical evolution of media, grounded as it is in a tradition of communication and interaction with its roots in public engagement and civic participation. It is therefore natural that Europe has taken the lead in addressing the development of media literacy as a social and scientific imperative. The issue of media literacy is a top priority for the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the national governments. The European Commission⁹, in its Digital Education Action Plan (2018) clearly states its concern that:

“ [e]veryday exposure to digital data driven largely by inscrutable algorithms creates clear risks and requires more than ever critical thinking and the ability to engage positively and competently in the digital environment. We face a constantly evolving need for media literacy and a wide mix of digital skills and competences including safety, security and privacy, but getting them to the wider population [...] remains a challenge”.

And it further mentions the:

“need to strengthen children’s and young people’s critical thinking and media literacy, so they can judge and overcome the ever-present threats of fake news, cyber bullying, radicalization, cybersecurity threats and fraud. Even the youngest children are in daily contact with digital technologies yet do not understand the risks, and parents worry about inappropriate content and risks but do not know how to address them”. In the revised Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018)¹⁰, the Council of Europe reinstates¹¹ digital competence as one of the eight key competences for all European citizens. Digital competence means the

⁹ European Commission (2018). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Digital Education Action Plan. COM(2018) 22 final. Brussels: European Commission.

¹⁰ Official Journal of the European Union (2018). Recommendations of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018/C 189/01). OJ C189/1, 04.06.2018.

¹¹ as in 2016

confident and critical use of digital technology and covers the knowledge, skills and attitudes that all citizens need in a rapidly evolving digital society.

In the words of the European Commission:

“Individuals should understand how digital technologies can support communication, creativity and innovation, and be aware of their opportunities, limitations, effects and risks, [...] should take a critical approach to the validity, reliability and impact of information and data made available by digital means [and] should be able to manage and protect information, content, data, and digital identities”. 35 European Commission (2018). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Digital Education Action Plan. COM(2018) 22 final.

The Council of the European Union further highlights the importance of relevant activities, in its Conclusions on Developing Media Literacy and Critical Thinking through Education and Training (2016):

“[A]s part of their overall mission to prepare young people for society and the labour market, as well as to support them in achieving personal fulfilment, education and training have an important role to play in helping young people to become media literate and responsible citizens of the future. and further mentions that

“[o]ne key element of education and training’s mission is to install in young people fundamental values such as those enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union and to develop and maintain an open and inquiring mindset, while being able to think independently and critically, to exercise sound judgement using fact-based knowledge and to resist and counter extremist messages, indoctrination and disinformation”.

The EUROPEAN SAFEONLINE project fulfils all the aforementioned goals and attempts to introduce parents into the media worlds of the children, to answer the principal question of how to attend to their children’s media use and to discuss issues such as what their children are doing with the media, what they use media for and why they are attracted by the media.

THE FLEMISH SAFEONLINE INITIATIVE

The overall goal of the Flemish SafeOnline programme is to improve the media literacy levels of parents of children and youth in the Flemish Region of Belgium. In 2008, the joint commitment of Child Focus and the Gezinsbond to educate parents on the safe use of the new media led to the inauguration of the very successful SafeOnline programme. The SafeOnline programme is the example of an excellent collaboration, between two expert organisations that get the best out of them to give parents practical and expert advice on online safety awareness training. Since the inauguration of the SafeOnline programme, more than thirty thousand (30.000) people have benefited from the organization of a total of one thousand two hundred (1.200) SafeOnline training programmes in Flanders, alone, and the training groups are still full. The SafeOnline programme raises parents’ interest and understanding of the media activities of their children, offers advice on how to introduce children to digital media devices and teaches parents and children (together) the mechanics of the new media. This great programme empowers parents to question, evaluate and discuss the use of new media within their homes. The SafeOnline programme is premised on the belief that parental media mediation is of utmost importance. The SafeOnline programme empowers parents in being coherent in their family educational project, persistent in their intentions and consistent in their actions. The principal question that the SafeOnline programme tries to answer is: How should parents attend to the media usage of their children? Through the programme, parents come to know what their children are doing with media, what they use media for and they are attracted by media. Parents develop an interest and understanding of the media worlds of their children. The ultimate aim of the SafeOnline programme is that after its completion parents will be able to help their children to develop a critical understanding of media content and messages, to be more demanding about what they consume and also to develop a critical attitude towards media uses. In 2017, through an extensive consultation process - with the involvement of Universities, schools and local organisations - methodology and the format of the SafeOnline training programmes was redesigned, in order:

[a]. to respond to the latest societal and digital developments and

[b]. to expand the reach of the SafeOnline initiative, so as to include more socially disadvantaged families – as well as grandparents – therefore, aiming to reduce the digital divide.

The redesign of the educational content occurred in collaboration with the University of Antwerp and Odisee University College in Belgium and with feedback from relevant stakeholder groups [professionals, parents etc.]. This restructuring led the SafeOnline initiative to incorporate five (5) new interactive modules [internet and privacy, gaming, social media, cyberbullying, online relations and sexuality], instead of the three (3) modules [safe online, cyberbullying and gaming] that it initially included. The element of interactivity became central to the development of the new modules. Thus, the new modules are now enhanced with quizzes, simulations,

interactive gaming, testimonials and videos. Moreover, the SafeOnline programme has creatively and inventively managed to reach out at socially disadvantaged families [families in poverty, migrant families, single-parent families and so on] with specially designed sessions. The utter aim of this effort is to bridge the digital divide and to empower parents of disadvantaged background to be part of a digitalized society, by enforcing their digital skills and, thus, those of their children. Currently, the SafeOnline training content is made available either through:

[a]. traditional classroom training sessions that are organized in accessible settings [such as schools, libraries and community centres] and

[b]. online training sessions via the SafeOnline website [<http://www.veiligonline.be>].

THE SAFEONLINE PROGRAMME AS THE BEST PRACTICE IN MEDIA LITERACY IN EUROPE IN 2018

The Flemish SafeOnline initiative serves as a model of inspiration in Europe in the field of media literacy. One of the most important distinctions it has received is its choice as the best practice in the prestigious #SaferInternet4EU Awards, that are organized by the European Commission. The #SaferInternet4EU Awards are one of the milestones of the #SaferInternet4EU Campaign. The #SaferInternet4EU Campaign aims to promote media literacy making children, parents and teachers more aware of digital opportunities and challenges. In this context, the European Commission [through the Better Internet for Kids] initiated a European contest to reward high quality resources and inspiring initiatives in the field of media literacy. The competition covered three (3) categories: organisations, teachers and youth. Hundreds of excellent projects being run all over Europe applied for this. On 20 November 2018, in an award ceremony that took place in the Safer Internet Forum in Brussels, Belgium, Mariya Gabriel, the Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society, announced that the Flemish SafeOnline initiative is the winner of the award for organisations. As such, the Belgian SafeOnline initiative is currently recognised as the best practice in Europe in its ability to tackle issues such as fake news, cyberbullying, connected toys and privacy concerns, grooming, exposure to harmful or disturbing content and cyber hygiene issues more generally.