POLICY BRIEF
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MEDIA EDUCATION AS INFORMATIONAL RIGHT FOR YOUTH IN EUROPE

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Who is this aimed at

- EU education policy makers and planners in government and institutions

Key messages

- Youth is the new digital generation and media education for youth is of critical importance
- Regulatory measures for media can protect young people without harming democratic rights and freedoms
- There is an urgent need to create public service oriented digital platforms that will promote diversity and democracy

Introduction

New rapidly developing technologies and digitalization shape and change social institutions and behaviours, habits and ways of connecting, learning and seeking information. These changes have an impact on each European citizen's life, particularly young generations. With limitless exposure and access of young people to sources of information , whether online news or social media, the important question is to what extent society fulfils the informational needs of young people. Moreover, in which ways it encourages systemic responses within the context of misinformation, suspicion, and manipulation on the one hand and critique, scepticism and enquiry on the other. What role do public service media as an institution assigned with specific civic responsibilities towards democratic governance play in this process. Most importantly, how should media education be revisited, so that young generations (16 to 25 years old) understand technological architectures beyond interface and use media technologies and content in the way that is beneficial and empowering.

Youth and Media in Europe: Context of the Problem

Digitalisation has made the Internet an aggregator of different services previously carried by analogue and linear media services. In other words, changes in the media landscape are driven by changes in technology and the ways in which policy is capable to encourage or hinder technological change with a public good purpose. Despite these opportunities, potential and even hope that digital technologies have given society and individuals, the reality of Internet governance is more complicated and to many ineffective in addressing challenges such as privacy, safety, anonymity, information. Digital giants led by Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Meta have acquired unparalleled economic, political and cultural power. Their subsidiaries as content providers and networking sites have the power to undermine indispensable resources of credible and accurate information, in-depth analysis, rational debate and diversity of representation that allow society to fully understand the challenges we face. They have created a communications landscape dominated by surveillance, advertising, fake news, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and algorithmic allocation of users to commercial and political content tailored to their expressed tastes and opinions. As currently organized, internet platforms create a communications system, which is easily rendered as one of polarisation, monetisation of personal data, and tribalism giving rise to some of the most uncivil human behaviours. Indeed, algorithmic and market orientated encouragement for extreme content and expression has been seen in producing not only digital but also physical victims of harassment, abuse, effective marginalisation and silencing of voices.

It is argued that the explosion in the volume of information has led to citizens tending to rely on or trust the dominant platforms to filter and distribute information, rather than managing their own personal learning environments with feeds from trusted independent sources. As filtering mechanisms become more sophisticated and more personalized to the individual, opportunities for the wealthy and/or information warfare propagandists, including states, to steer public opinion become even greater. Hence, the expectation that informational environments offer a basic minimum of free access to reliable and credible information, the basic principle on which a democratic system depends, becomes challenged at a fundamental level: both on a structural level and on the level of symbolic legitimacy. Moreover, the combination of informational bubbles, invasion of privacy over social networks and traceability of informational imparting and consumption, create a set of conditions that some liken to the dystopian world of George Orwell's 1984.

Predictions warn that within the next decade, 75% of the world's population will be 'enslaved' by artificial intelligence-based surveillance systems. These systems will keep every citizen under observation around the clock, seven days a week, monitoring their every action. To date, virtually no democratic state or system has sorted out how to deal with this challenge to the fundamental legitimacy of democratic processes. This increases the need for European and national institutions to become more vigilant, and look where this process is leading to, what can be done to regulate the environment within the context of the media without harming democracy. It should promote and encourage a set of values to be governed as a form of multi-governance, which promote informational actions that can be further directed towards the recognition and flourishing of enabling environments for young people's pro-democratic engagement.

In a democracy one of the most important roles of the media is to inform citizens of all ages and backgrounds aware of what is happening around the world in a true and fact-based way. Only this way a healthy enlightened population can emerge and exist. Therefore, it is vital to promote and provide adequate media education among young generations.

 Raising empowered generations that can identify and avoid misinformation on its own terms is not only the most effective solution available, it is also the most democratic way to restore trust in media, fellow citizens, and other institutions. It empowers citizens to make informed choices about what information is worthy of their trust, instead of leaving those decisions to governments or other entities.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The power of media is capable to set new conditions and circumstances under which knowledge and social relations develop. Due to their overwhelming importance in society, the media have transcended their role as mere instruments to become an omnipresent conditioning force on individuals in their social and cultural contexts. The media are a milieu, a climate in which we live and exist. And although they served and still serve as democratic instruments, the fact that these instruments have ended up shaping the way we are entangled in informational bubbles, should not be neglected. Therefore, the kind of media education that youth needs now must go beyond any established pedagogical instruments. It must be considered a conscientious effort to seize and improve the conditions in which society develops its social faculties of comprehension, intelligence, dialogue, and civic relations.

On one side, the focus needs to be brought on a consideration of individual freedom and autonomy. On the other side, the accent has to be on establishing social rules for protecting individual and collective rights. The media education arises somewhere in the middle. It is also related to prevention, perhaps even to the fear aroused by the power attributed to the media, and the resulting need to regulate and control their expansion and use. Thus, the lack of media education if often associated with a feeling of vulnerability, especially on the part of children and youth, when faced with media, and the resulting need to regulate and protect.

Media education

Modern education's role is to enable students to live, learn and thrive in a diverse, global media culture, both online and offline. Education must emphasize information processing skills as central to teaching and learning. Media literacy offers empowerment through education and an opportunity to equip citizens with the skills they need to become lifelong learners who are maximally prepared to navigate and leverage the power of media for their own benefit and that of others. Media literacy education needs a constant evolvement to address philosophies, methodologies, and tools for encouraging critical thinking in teaching and learning. The time is now to prepare young citizens to be effective risk managers, efficient organizers of information, wise consumers, responsible content producers and active participants. Media literacy education provides youth with the knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes needed to reap the benefits of their media use as well as to protect them from potential harm (Meeus et al., 2014).

Modern media education's model therefore should combine a realistic recognition of new media possibilities including AI's increasing role in shaping information and content, with criticism and the search for alternatives to certain risks presented by the media. Media education must develop the know-how to maintain a healthy balance between taking advantage of opportunities provided by the new media developments for individual self-realisation – declared emphatically by the market discourse. At the same time media education must provide citizens with the know-how to identify negative aspects through criticism and analysis, and consequently how to encourage agreement and consensus on self-control and regulation.

The following changes in the current media education approach are suggested for implementation.

1. Diversify content: Media education needs to incorporate more diverse perspectives and experiences in their curricula to better reflect the world and the youth population in Europe.

2. Emphasize digital literacy: With the increasing presence of technology and the internet in our daily lives, it is essential for media education to include lessons on digital literacy, media literacy, and critical thinking skills.

3. Promote media literacy and critical thinking: Students need to be taught to analyze, interpret, and evaluate media messages so they can develop critical thinking skills to help them navigate the digital world.

4. Focus on media ethics and responsibility: Media education must place greater emphasis on media ethics and responsibility, including responsible use of information and ethical behavior on social media.

5. Encourage media creation and entrepreneurship: Youth should be taught how to create, produce, and distribute their own media content, and be encouraged to think creatively and entrepreneurially.

6. Foster cross-cultural understanding: Media education must provide opportunities for students to learn about and interact with different cultures and perspectives, promoting cross-cultural understanding and respect.

7. Stay current: The field of media and technology is constantly evolving, and media education needs to keep pace with these changes to ensure that students are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need for the future

Media education is a major policy priority and its ever evolving mission and content has to be flexible and able to should cover topics like media literacy, digital literacy, digital citizenship, and internet and social media safety. This type of education is needed by the many to successfully navigate today's 21st century media culture and today's digitalised life as a whole. For that reason, media literacy is not only a new subject to teach, it is also a new way to teach all subjects. Individuals and schools alone cannot counter balance the dominant role of global platforms (Livingstone et al., 2022). Thus, states need to include media literacy as a core per of contemporary education: media literacy must evolve continuously to include basic technological knowledge of algorithms and AI.

Public Service Internet as a "new" Internet?

The growing need for an Internet that is oriented towards stronger public service is becoming increasingly pressing as the digital age continues to advance. The current Internet is largely dominated by commercial interests and can lead to information imbalance and unequal access. With the Internet being an integral part of daily life for many individuals, it is crucial that the public is provided with access to reliable and safe information and services.

The "new" Internet has the potential to make these services more accessible, efficient and cost-effective, but only if it is designed to prioritize public service. To address these issues and to ensure the Internet is serving the public good, there is a growing need to encourage initiatives and policies that prioritize public service values, such as accessibility, privacy, and security. This can involve supporting non-profit organizations, promoting digital literacy, and advocating for laws and regulations that put public interest first. By fostering public service-oriented Internet, everyone could get equal access to the opportunities and benefits it provides.

More awareness

- for changing media routines and the impact for the younger generations
- for involvement of Public service media in the just recenty implemeted subjects like "digital basic education" at secondary school level
- for relevance of quality journalism and democracy education.

Supporting youth

- Promotion of young, independent and fact-based journalism.
- Providing young people interested in media and upcoming journalists with training, further education, networking, exchange etc. Young people often need a helping hand to facilitate their entry into journalism and the media world.
- Establishing independent organisations where young people can participate in decision-making.
- A greater say and decision-making right of this population group would contribute significantly to a better discourse in terms of democratic values and representation of the whole society.
- Allowing young people to be more involved and participate without the mandatory requirement of a completed degree or greater practical experience.

Regulation of the Internet

In European countries with a fragile democracy (mostly post-conflict countries) but also where the rise of authoritarianism is evident, Internet space remains unregulated and it is important to have strong public broadcaster to protect the democracy.

Public broadcaster should play a crucial role in
- regulating media market, by raising the standard of service,
- producing quality journalism by employing ethical standards and impartiality
- adopting its platforms to its targeted audience.

It is a global challenge that yet has not been addressed in a sustainable way. Regulations on accuracy, transparency, impartiality, and above all education of the society must be provided.

Conclusion

Media education overall should be taking into account the possibility of the public service Internet and transformed educational system in schools. This must be seen as part of young people's informational rights and collective effort must be made to address the ever evolving digital challenges.

Media education should involve teaching youth about the validity of sources, develop their cross-checking skills, provide knowledge of how AI and online algorithms work. It is important for them to understand that not everything they see on the internet is true, and they need to be able to identify credible sources. Cross-checking skills will help them to verify information and avoid dis- and misinformation. Knowledge algorithms can help understand how their online experiences are tailored to them and how they can control the information they see. It is essential to empower young people with the skills and knowledge to consume and navigate media consciously. Media literacy is not and cannot be static and must keep pace with the changing digital landscape.

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Jean Monnet Communication, Facts and Regulation for European Democracy (FREuDe) Centre of Excellence

– stimulates new forward thinking with regards the role of facts and place of regulation for securing a future democratic Europe
- generates new research and policy-oriented thinking about integration on the basis of informational rights and enabling informational environments across disciplines not traditionally involved in studying Europe:
- develops new agendas for research, policy and teaching across disciplines and across stakeholder communities
- provides an impetus for future oriented thinking, by researching the needs and perceptions of Europe's future autonomous citizens, young people and in particular children for factual information in and about Europe
- mobilises knowledges and competencies of a range of experts and especially aiming to "hear from" stakeholders which have historically been permitted least input to questions of right to accurate and comprehensive information as a civil and human right.

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