DRE

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Digital and Critical Media Literacy in Europe

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Digital and Critical Media Literacy in Europe

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This is the first part of a comprehensive research publication that has as a point of reference the creation of a common conceptual framework in the field of digital media literacy and critical media literacy (DML-CML) and that is meant to be used for improving the organizational capabilities of the consortium members and stakeholders.

It includes a comprehensive literature review on the topics of Digital Media Literacy and Critical Media Literacy as these arise in the European area.

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Introduction

The DRE project

The COVID pandemic is the latest in a series of challenges faced by our countries, which have appeared to be inadequately prepared despite the fact that science provides the ability to reliably predict, identify problems and find solutions. Nevertheless, accepting and applying the instruments of science presupposes an approach that allows for informed decisions by the members of any given society. Such a necessity is undermined by certain characteristics of our time, such as the crisis of public confidence in the reliability of scientific information. At the core of this problem is public knowledge and the nature of science's communication with society as it has been shaped in today's post-truth era.[1]

Social networking and the media ensure easy access and immediate dissemination of a vast amount of scientific information. But this is not done based on the principles of honesty, but according to the rules of persuasive communication and manipulation. Emotions rule over facts and user satisfaction is at the heart of the communication process. Thus, a situation arises where objective facts have less influence on the formation of public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs. Informing the public is based on faith rather than objectivity, which makes information particularly resistant to evidence and thus favors not only misinformation but also the development of conspiracy theories. In this environment, more and more segments of the population are ready to ignore the facts or even accept obvious lies. The success of communication no longer depends on supporting the truth but on forming a "sense of truth".

The consequences of such a situation became rather evident in the context of the pandemic, since in the European area, hesitance towards vaccination was particularly strong due to a potent anti-vaccination movement that was reproduced mainly through digital media such as social media platforms. It is obvious that citizens who are vulnerable to misinformation may even constitute a risk for public health. Although this loss of trust in science depends on a wide range of factors (education, economic status, political/religious beliefs, access to the internet), the role of digital media and especially social media in shaping this new situation seems to be particularly decisive. These considerations are at the core of the present work.

[1] Bagdikian, B. H. The new media monopoly. Boston, Beacon Press, 2004

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With this project, we aim to leverage the collective expertise, knowledge, and diverse perspectives from fields such as education, psychology, communications, media arts, film theory, cultural studies, multicultural education, public health, and media production to intentionally use media literacy education to cultivate a culture of inquiry. Our objective is to assist other educators in developing lifelong learners who are curious, sceptical, respectful, open-minded, and able to exchange ideas within the mediated environment they experience. These qualities, which cross the typical boundaries of subjects and academic disciplines, present educational organisations with a unique chance to enhance their overall curriculum.[2] By encouraging collaboration among educators, trainers and teachers, media literacy can act as a unifying thread that links various classes and topics.

[2] Bazalgette, C. (Ed.). Primary media education: A curriculum statement. London, UK: British Film Institute, 1989

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1. The Context and Relevance of DML

This is an interesting time to be an educator. For only the second time in human history, the concept of literacy is undergoing a significant transformation, a change that is unfolding in classrooms and libraries around the globe. The first major shift was sparked by the invention of the printing press,[3] which redefined who could be literate. The ability to mass-produce written materials challenged the idea that literacy was the privilege of a select few and demonstrated the power that reading and writing granted to those who possessed these skills. This revelation was so profound in Europe that Church authorities persecuted printers, fearing their power would diminish if everyone could read and interpret the Bible for themselves.[4] Similarly, in early America, laws prohibited teaching enslaved people to read.[5] Eventually, such resistance faded as democracy demanded an informed populace, the shift from monarchic rule to governance by an educated electorate required widespread literacy.

Today, we are experiencing a second transformation. Instead of questioning who should be literate, we are now asking, what does literacy mean. Like the first shift, this one is driven by technological advancements. The widespread availability of digital and interactive communication tools has provided access to vast information and global audiences, fundamentally changing education and the essential skills needed to function as informed citizens, productive workers, effective parents, and lifelong learners.[6] Thus, we try to examine what it means to be literate in today's complex media landscape and how educators can use media literacy education to engage students and prepare them for the constantly evolving digital world.

Media literacy is built on a three-sided foundation: it is literacy-based, inquiry-based, and curriculum-driven. Such an approach is capable to address the most urgent needs in the modern educational environment while also enhancing

[3] Eisenstein Elizabeth, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, Cambridge University Press, 1980

[4] Cloud, David W. Rome and the Bible: Tracing the History of the Roman Catholic Church and Its Persecution of the Bible. United States: Way of Life Literature, 1996

[5] Cornelius, Janet D. When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991

[6] Tyner, K. R. Literacy in a digital world: Teaching and learning in the age of information. Mahwah Erlbaum, 1998

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learners in their critical roles they play in a democratic society.[7]

Today, even traditional print sources like textbooks and newspapers frequently combine text, images, and sometimes sound. In this context, literacy skills limited to reading, analysing, and writing in print are insufficient for students to fully benefit from being literate. Merely applying old methods to new technologies is inadequate. According to the educational philosopher Paulo Freire, literacy is a broad set of skills and habits that enable thoughtful engagement with the community and the world. Therefore, media literacy isn't simply about embracing new technologies, it's about empowering students in a technology-driven world with the skills traditional literacy once provided.[8]

In the participatory digital culture, every student must develop higher-order thinking skills. This is not just about workforce preparation. Without the ability to think critically, evaluate and synthesise information, solve problems independently and collaboratively, and effectively communicate their understanding, students will become overwhelmed.[9] Moreover, without reflection, they wield new media technologies without the ethical grounding to use them responsibly.

This new reality underscores why the questions "What does it mean to be literate?" and "How can those literacy skills be developed?" are central to media literacy pedagogy. It is important to employ an approach that is rooted in critical thinking and established literacy practices, expanding conventional methods to include a broader range of content and formats without seeking to replace traditional literacy or creating a false dichotomy between print and digital media.[10]

A literacy framework allows educators to move beyond viewing media as inherently problematic while maintaining the critical perspective we want students to apply to the media they encounter. It values students' existing knowledge, skills, and talents while challenging them to take responsibility for their learning and develop increasingly sophisticated evaluative skills.

Those who view media literacy education only as teaching students to analyse advertising or shield themselves from the perceived dangers of video games, the

[7] De Abreu, B. S. Teaching media literacy: A how-to-do-it manual. New York, Neal-Schuman, 2007

[8] Freire, P. Education for critical consciousness. New York, Seabury Press, 1973

[9] Freire, P., & Macedo, D. Literacy: Reading the word and the world. South Hadley, Bergin & Garvey, 1987

[10] Semali, L. M., & Pailliotet, A. W. (Eds.). Intermediality: The teachers' handbook of critical media literacy. Boulder Westview Press, 1999

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internet, TV, and movies might want to entertain a different perspective.[11]

While concerns about harmful media influences have validity, on their own they cannot provide a solid foundation for literacy-based media literacy education in schools. It is not pedagogically sound to approach education merely with the aim of protecting children from harmful content; after all, educators do not teach reading to shield students from bad books. Though there were times when junior library cards and locked stacks kept adult materials away from children, we have never seen teachers giving lessons on book safety. Such protectionist strategies fail to create skilled readers of books, and they will not succeed in producing skilled consumers of other media.

Moreover, focusing on shielding students from harmful media content is inconsistent with the constructivist pedagogies that are of central importance to most theoretical work. As author James Baldwin once stated, "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions"[12]. Educators cannot simultaneously tell students what to think about media and teach them to think independently. This approach also risks alienating students, making them sceptical whenever broad criticisms of media contradict their own experiences.

In this line, constructivist theory holds that meaningful learning occurs when students make sense of the world by filtering new information through their existing knowledge, concepts, and personal experiences.[13] The role of an educator is to help students find their voices and develop their understanding of the subject matter. Students are more engaged and more likely to retain what they have learned when they grapple with material and draw their own conclusions, rather than being told what media mean or what their effects are.

Media literacy education adopts constructivist pedagogy because it lays the groundwork for genuine inquiry, unlike drill-and-practice methods, rigidly scripted curricula, or didactic teaching. The resulting instructional methods have a proven record of engaging diverse students, making basic skills, knowledge,

[11] Prensky, M. How computer and video games are preparing your kids for twenty first century success and how you can help. Saint Paul, Paragon House, 2006

[12] Baldwin, J. A talk to teachers. In Morrison, T. (Ed.), James Baldwin: Collected essays (pp. 678–686). New York, NY:Library of America, 1998

[13] Jackson, R. R. Never work harder than your students & other principles of great teaching. ASCD, 2009

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and higher-order thinking skills accessible to them.[14]

Fully acknowledging the practical challenges of implementing media literacy education in classrooms already strained for time and resources, contemporary educators of media literacy want to advocate for a curriculum-driven approach, where media literacy is integrated into existing core content.[15]

Such an approach encourages teachers to identify opportunities within their curriculum where media literacy techniques can enhance instruction, boost student engagement, or improve performance. They then create tailored lessons to address these needs. By combining media literacy skills with core content, this approach maximises instructional time, often without requiring additional class time compared to before media literacy was introduced.

Incorporating media literacy into existing curricula does not eliminate the need for specialised media literacy courses. There will always be a place for classes or activities that provide advanced or specialised training in media analysis and production for interested students. However, this approach stresses that media literacy education cannot thrive if it is confined solely to specialised courses, just as traditional literacy would be ineffective if taught only as a supplementary subject.

[14]Thoman, E., & Jolls, T. Literacy for the 21st century: An overview & orientation guide to media literacy education. Santa Monica, Center for Media Literacy, 2005

[15] Sperry, C. The epistemological equation: Integrating media analysis into the core curriculum. Journal of Media Literacy Education, 1(2), 89–98, 2010

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2. The conceptual framework

We are constantly surrounded by media from the moment we wake up until we go to sleep. Media are so embedded in our daily lives that most people, even those who are media-literate, often don't consciously notice the majority of media messages they encounter. Since critical thinking is impossible about things we don't notice, the first step in media literacy education is to heighten learners' awareness of the media's role in their lives. To delve into this, we must clarify what we mean by "media." The term can vary depending on the context (e.g., in art, it might refer to materials like clay or paint). In the context of media literacy, it refers specifically to mass media.

2.1 What is Media

In professional development workshops for educators, participants list the types of mass media that they are most familiar with. Common responses include radio, television, newspapers, magazines, the internet/computers, and movies. College students, however, are more likely to begin their list with cell phones, the internet, and iPods or MP3 players. Depending on the age of participants, people often add video and computer games, recorded music, billboards, advertisements (including those on clothing, in stores, sports stadiums, and on food packaging), as well as posters and flyers.

One notable omission from these lists is books. Despite being a significant form of mass media for over two centuries and commonly used in schools, workshop participants, even library media specialists, rarely include books on their media lists.[16] This may be because people associate "media" with electronic technologies or see media as "bad" or harmful, while viewing books as "good." Regardless of the reason, in an inquiry-based approach to media literacy education, it is crucial to consider books alongside newer forms of media.[17]

Regardless of personal beliefs about the relative value of different types of media such as printed text versus digital images, or traditional versus new media, educators that aim to make critical inquiry a habitual practice for students, cannot selectively apply critical thinking to only certain media forms while ignoring others. Including books as a type of media not only challenges our perceptions of what constitutes media, but also calls into question long-standing

[16] Kellner, D. Preface. In McLaren, P., Hammer, R., Sholle, D., & Reilly, S. S. (Eds.), Rethinking media literacy: A critical pedagogy of representation (pp. xiii–xvii). New York, Peter Lang, 1995

[17] Potter, W. J. Media literacy (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2005

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efforts that focus on reducing or eliminating media use (such as screen time) as the primary goal of media literacy.[18] Media literacy is a natural extension of traditional literacy and if the definition of media includes books, then an educational approach primarily centred on limiting media use seems misguided and outdated.

Books are not the only form of media often omitted. Other commonly overlooked forms include classroom media like posters depicting global scenes, school newsletters sent to parents, and maps, which often reflect specific perspectives and may distort the relative sizes of countries and continents. Even money, particularly paper currency, functions as media, as it typically bears carefully designed words and images meant to convey messages to both the country's citizens and those from other nations.[19]

A proper understanding of mass media is crucial because it influences how we approach media literacy in general. We define mass media with the following characteristics:[20]

1. Media transmit messages through visuals, language, and/or sound.

2. Media messages are mass-produced for a broad audience and involve some form of technology.

3. The creators of media messages are physically separate from the recipients.

This definition covers various forms of media like books, maps, and others previously mentioned, but not all communication fits neatly into this framework. For example, while paintings convey messages and are sometimes reproduced in media formats, the original painting is not mass-produced. Personal conversations via phone or email do not meet the mass production criterion, although spam emails and certain prerecorded phone messages do. Creating digital videos or PowerPoint presentations often falls under media literacy education, even if these presentations are not intended for mass production and are shown in the presence of the creators who interact directly with the audience. Additionally, new forms of communication, particularly those involving digital technologies, have introduced content like text messaging with its own unique vocabulary and grammar, further complicating the distinctions among media formats.[21]

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Scheibe C., Rogow F., The Teacher s Guide to Media Literacy,Corwin Press, 2012

[21] Ibid.

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Some level of ambiguity should be allowed for in defining media since media literacy aims to neither exclude nor favour specific forms of media. Instead, it focuses on preparing learners to navigate their world effectively and think independently. If something doesn't precisely meet the definition of media but helps enhance media literacy skills through analysis or creation, it should be included in the curriculum. The emphasis is on media messages, namely the content of the medium, rather than the technology used to deliver that content.

This does not imply that all media formats should be treated equally. A fundamental aspect of media literacy is to analyse and compare messages across different media formats, considering their language, structure, communication techniques, and their respective strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the content of books or newspapers, and the information or entertainment provided by television and computers is more important than the technologies themselves.

On a similar note, although media literacy focuses on how different people may interpret the same message in various ways, not everything from which people derive meaning qualifies as media. For instance, while some might find meaning in the alignment of stars or patterns in clouds, stars and clouds themselves are not considered media.[22]

A good example to illustrate the above is clothing. Historically, people have used specific clothing items or colours to communicate aspects of their identity, such as socioeconomic status, religion, or nationality. However, for clothing to be classified as media, it must convey a message created by someone other than the wearer. For instance, a shirt with a brand name or company logo represents mediated communication between the company and viewers. In contrast, clothing worn by an individual to express personal identity is a direct form of communication from the wearer.[23]

Focusing on the message rather than the delivery technology becomes even more crucial as media forms converge. By the time today's preschoolers enter the workforce, it will be typical for a single device to function as a computer, phone, game console, radio, television, music player, camera, audio recorder, etc. Debates over the advantages of different media delivery systems are outdated for those who can use a compact, wireless device to perform a multitude of tasks such as accessing music and video, navigating maps, participating in online discussions, etc. In an era of media

[22] Masterman, L. Teaching the media. New York, Routledge, 1985

[23] Ibid.

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convergence and rapid technological advancement, the most effective approach for media literacy is to equip learners with reading, writing, analysis, and reflection skills that are applicable across all current and future technologies.[24]

As a result of the aforementioned considerations, media literacy operates on an inclusive definition of media and is guided by several principles about the nature of media. Over time, media literacy organisations have developed a set of concepts to identify and outline these principles. There is general consensus on six main points.[25]

1. Media messages are constructed. Media messages are crafted representations, shaped by human choices and the limitations and capabilities of media technologies. This concept emphasises not only the content but also the creators and their intentional methods.

2. Different media have unique characteristics. Each medium has its own set of rules for construction, such as visual elements, sound effects, and internet features. These characteristics determine the effectiveness of media for various communication tasks. For instance, a video is more suited for demonstrating how to hit a baseball, while a book is better for understanding complex logical arguments.

3. Media messages serve multiple purposes. Media messages are often created with various goals in mind, and many are produced by teams with different objectives.

4. Media messages embed values and perspectives. Beyond their overt content, media messages reflect the values and viewpoints of their creators, as well as societal norms and normative rules. For example, a clothing ad not only promotes products but also conveys underlying cultural ideas about beauty, it is mediated by the aesthetic values of the society in which it is produced and consumed.

5. Individuals interpret media messages differently. People use their own skills, beliefs, and experiences to derive meaning from media messages. Interpretation varies based on personal differences such as age, race, culture, and political views. There can be dominant interpretations, but differing views are valid.

6. Media heavily influence beliefs and behaviours. Media messages affect beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviours, including those relating to the democratic processes. However, this influence is not guaranteed or uniform, as

[24] Rother, I. L. The struggle for literacy. Calgary, Detselig Enterprises, 2008

[25] Scheibe C., Rogow F., The Teacher s Guide to Media Literacy,Corwin Press, 2012

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individuals may disregard or be indifferent to certain messages. Despite this, media literacy is based on the understanding that media have a significant impact on the ideological framework of individuals, groups and even entire societies.

2.2 What is Media Literacy

In this section we will go through the conceptual basis of defining media literacy, which involves various scholarly interpretations. Livingstone[26] explores what constitutes media literacy, how it has evolved, and its implications for older, print-based literacy skills. Her research defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages across different media. According to Tyner, media literacy is viewed as a skill with a longstanding, yet debated significance, often associated with social ideals such as economic growth, personal fulfilment, and self-determination.[27] Christ and Potter[28] mention that media literacy involves the capacity to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages for diverse audiences while it also emphasises a skills-based approach, focusing on the abilities needed rather than the text-based content or technological mediation of communication. Livingstone and Thumim analyse the concept of the role of media literacy, suggesting that it is a skill involving the ability to access, identify, and create connections within various contexts[29]. Meyrowitz defines media literacy by separating it into three distinct categories, namely content, grammar, and medium literacy. Content literacy pertains to understanding ideas and value representation in media messages, which are central to media literacy. It also involves recognising that media content is imbued with values. Medium literacy focuses on understanding the structural elements, techniques, and visual strategies used in media messages, such as angles, cuts, and juxtapositions.[30] Silverblatt describes media literacy as a critical skill enabling audiences to form independent judgments about media content.[31] Kubey sees media literacy as a

[26] http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/13476/1/The_changing_nature_and_uses_of_media_literacy.pdf.

[27] Tyner, K. Literacy in a digital world: Teaching and learning in the age of information. New Jersey, LEA, 1998

[28] Christ, W. G., & Potter, W. J. Media literacy, media education, and the academy. Journal of communication, 48(1), 1998

[29] Livingstone, S., & Thumim, N. Assessing the media literacy of UK adults: A review of the academic literature, 2003

[30] Meyrowitz, J. Multiple media literacies. Journal of communication, 48(1), 96-108, 1998

[31] Silverblatt, A., Miller, D. C., Smith, J., & Brown, N. Media literacy, Keys to interpreting media messages, ABC-CLIO, 2014

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skill for individuals to interpret, evaluate, analyse, and create both print and electronic media messages, with the goal of fostering independence from other media. This concept emphasises social influence, confidence, language, and user competence.[32] Aufderheide views According to Aufderheide[33] media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, and acquire information on specific subjects or issues, enabling individuals to decode, evaluate, and analyse information across print and electronic media. Thoman asserts that media literacy involves the ability to create personal, meaningful messages through various media, such as television, radio, computers, newspapers, magazines, and advertising, as well as to produce content across print and electronic media. Essentially, it is a skill that empowers individuals to critically assess and question the media they consume, enabling them to remain aware of their surroundings and to engage thoughtfully with the world around them.[34] Finally, according to the International Encyclopedia, media literacy implies that users are active, not passive, a media-literate person is adept at navigating sociopolitical perspectives, using regulatory and representational systems effectively, and fulfilling their role as a responsible member of society.[35]

2.3 Which are the media literacy key competences

In this modern technology-driven world, media literacy is one of the crucial skills that should be possessed by everyone since it enables them to interact with various media content in a critical and objective manner. It encompasses several core competences that allow people to be responsible and knowledgeable about, create, access, analyse, and evaluate the media.

Access is the first competency that has to be mastered as it enables an individual to locate the information they require as well as use various formats. Analyze is a skill that enables one to evaluate the underlying concepts in the message, its key audiences and any likely prejudices towards it.

There are also competencies that place an emphasis on the act of consuming media content. For instance, coping focused media literacy aims at the saying

[32] Kubey, R. W. (Ed.). Media literacy in the information age: current perspectives, 1997

[33] Aufderheide, P. Media Literacy, a Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program, Washington, 1993

[34] Thoman, E. Skills and strategies for media education. Educational Leadership, 56 (5), 50-54, 1999

[35] International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 14, Eds. N. J. Smelser & P .B. Baltes, Oxford, p.9494, 2001

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of the endorsers but the suggesting of frame brands and practices that can be adopted.

However, it should be pointed out that media literacy directs its goal not only towards informing members of society, but also towards assisting them in ethical media production. It encourages people to take up responsibility for their media. Action is a core capacity of media literacy and promotes positive change through the use of media.

Together, these competences make up a toolbox that every individual citizen has to use so as to be active participants in the existing complicated media landscape.

Media literacy involves a range of key competences that enable individuals to critically engage with media content. Here are some of the essential competences:[36]

1. **Access**: The ability to locate and use media content effectively. This includes understanding how to find reliable information and navigate different media platforms1.
2. **Analyse**: The skill to critically evaluate media messages, including identifying the purpose, target audience, and underlying messages. This involves recognizing biases, stereotypes, and propaganda1.
3. **Evaluate**: Assessing the credibility and quality of media content. This includes checking sources, verifying facts, and distinguishing between opinion and fact.
4. **Create**: The competence to produce media content responsibly and ethically. This includes understanding copyright laws, creating original content, and using media tools effectively.
5. **Reflect:** The ability to think critically about one's own media consumption and its impact. This involves understanding how the media influences beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours.
6. **Act**: Engaging with media in a way that promotes positive social change. This includes participating in digital citizenship, advocating for media literacy education, and using media to support community and civic engagement.

These competences are crucial for navigating the complex media landscape and making informed decisions in a digital age.[37]

2.4 Digital competence

Digital competence is one of the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. It was first defined in 2006, and

[36] https://www.unesco.org/mil4teachers/en/module1

[37] https://aml.ca/resources/eight-key-concepts-media-literacy/

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after an update of the Council Recommendation in 2018, it is defined as follows:

"Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking."[38]

The European Commission[39] also defines the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes related to this competence as follows:

- **Knowledge**: Individuals should understand how digital technologies can support communication, creativity and innovation, and be aware of their opportunities, limitations, effects and risks. They should understand the general principles, mechanisms and logic underlying evolving digital technologies and know the basic function and use of different devices, software, and networks. Individuals should take a critical approach to the validity, reliability and impact of information and data made available by digital means and be aware of the legal and ethical principles involved in engaging with digital technologies.
- **Skills**: Individuals should be able to use digital technologies to support their active citizenship and social inclusion, collaboration with others, and creativity towards personal, social or commercial goals. Skills include the ability to use, access, filter, evaluate, create, program and share digital content. Individuals should be able to manage and protect information, content, data, and digital identities, as well as recognise and effectively engage with software, devices, artificial intelligence or robots.
- **Attitudes**: Engagement with digital technologies and content requires a reflective and critical, yet curious, open-minded and forward-looking attitude to their evolution. It also requires an ethical, safe and responsible approach to the use of these tools.

[38] The Council of the European Union 2018, Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, 22 May 2018, ST 9009 2018 INIT

[39] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Key competences for lifelong learning, Publications Office, 2019, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/569540

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2.5 The relation with other competences

All Key competences are complementary and interconnected to each other. In other words, competences essential to one domain will support competence development in another.

For example, aspects of **Literacy competence** are needed when reading on paper or on screen. According to the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning recommendation, Literacy competence includes, for example, "the abilities to distinguish and use different types of sources, to search for, collect and process information". These skills are called upon when evaluating online content and its sources, a competence that forms an integral part of Information literacy in today's media-rich environment.

The concept of digital competence is also very closely related to that of **Media literacy**, which refers to skills, knowledge and understanding that allow citizens to use media effectively and safely. In order to enable citizens to access information and to use, critically assess and create media content responsibly and safely, citizens need to possess advanced media literacy skills. Media literacy should not be limited to learning about tools and technologies, but should aim to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills required to exercise judgement, analyse complex realities and recognise the difference between opinion and fact.

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3. Digital media literacy

Digital media literacy is, in today's information society, an essential and key skill for anyone who navigates the online environment and actively uses information and communication technologies (ICT). It is the ability to effectively and critically use digital media, understand them, and create their content.[40]

With the rapid development of ICT and social media, the way we approach and process information is changing. In this context, digital media literacy is gaining increasing importance and is crucial for both personal and professional development and success.[41]

Digital media literacy encompasses a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to:

- search for and process information from various digital sources;42
- critically evaluate content and its sources;
- create and share their own media content;43
- navigate the digital environment safely and ethically;
- understand the broader context of how digital media function and their impact on society.

3.1 The importance of digital media literacy in the context of social media

In today's digital age, social media plays a key role in how people communicate, obtain information and form opinions. It is therefore particularly important in this area to understand how social media works and how it can influence people's thinking and behaviour.

In a social media environment, we understand digital media literacy as a set of competencies that enable individuals to effectively and critically use, analyse, create and share digital content. This includes the ability to critically evaluate information, understand the workings of

[40] Hobbs, Renee. "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action." The Aspen Institute, 2010.

[41] Buckingham, David. "The Media Literacy of Children and Young People: A Review of the Research Literature." Ofcom, 2005

[42] Eshet-Alkalai, Yoram. "Digital Literacy: A Conceptual Framework for Survival Skills in the Digital Era." Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia 13, no. 1 (2004): 93-106.

[43] Jenkins, Henry, et al. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." The MIT Press, 2009.

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digital platforms and their algorithms, protect one's privacy and digital identity, communicate ethically online, and recognize potential risks and opportunities in the digital environment. In the context of social media, this literacy emphasises the ability to navigate the complex information ecosystem, distinguish between facts and misinformation, understand the implications of sharing content and actively participate in shaping a positive online community.

Specifically, it is a set of the following knowledge, skills and attitudes:

- *critical thinking* - the user is able to critically evaluate information obtained through social media, can identify misinformation[44] that is spread on social media and can distinguish between facts and opinions, understands the algorithms[45] that influence what content is displayed and can recognise manipulative techniques (e.g. clickbait, emotionally charged messages) and bias.
- *technical skills* - the user is able to use different social media and platforms, understand their functions and effectively use their tools to communicate and share content.
- *privacy protection* - the user is able to protect his/her personal information and understands the risks associated with sharing it on social media, knows how to use privacy settings and is aware of security measures.[46]
- *digital identity* - the user is able to create and manage his/her digital identity on social media. This includes presenting oneself in a way that reflects one's true values and interests, while protecting one's personal and professional reputation. The user is aware that data and information shared online can have a long-term impact on his/her digital identity.
- *ethical awareness and communication* - the user is aware of the ethical principles associated with the use of social media (e.g. copyright, respect for the privacy of other users,

[44] Kahne, Joseph, and Benjamin Bowyer. "Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation." American Educational Research Journal 54, no. 1 (2017): 3-34.

[45] Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Relevance of Algorithms." In Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot, 167-194. The MIT Press, 2014.

[46] Livingstone, Sonia, and Ellen Helsper. "Balancing Opportunities and Risks in Teenagers' Use of the Internet: The Role of Online Skills and Internet Self-efficacy." New Media & Society 12, no. 2 (2010): 309-329.

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responsible online behaviour)[47] and can communicate in a respectful and constructive manner, which is a key factor for a healthy online environment.

- *content creation* - the user knows how to effectively create and share content on different platforms, which is a valuable skill in personal and professional life.
- *digital wellbeing* - the user is aware of the impact of social media on mental health and can regulate their use.

3.2 Developing digital media literacy

Building and strengthening digital media literacy requires a systematic, multidisciplinary approach and the involvement of various actors, including educational institutions, parents, and individuals themselves. The development of digital media literacy should be part of not only the educational process but also lifelong learning. Given the rapid technological advancements, it is crucial to regularly update one's knowledge and skills.

It is appropriate for schools to incorporate digital media literacy education into their curricula and focus on specific topics such as digital competence, critical thinking, and online safety.[48] To ensure effective teaching of digital media literacy, ongoing education of teachers in this area is essential.[49] Education and support for parents are equally important.

There are many ways to effectively develop digital media literacy. For example, we can mention informal education (organising extracurricular activities in the form of workshops and seminars[50], using e-learning platforms that provide flexible education through online courses or webinars[51]), gamification[52] (using game elements and simulations for an attractive and interactive form of learning), and partnerships with technology companies (creating educational programs,

[47] James, Carrie. "Disconnected: Youth, New Media, and the Ethics Gap." The MIT Press, 2014.

[48] Buckingham, David. "Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture." Polity Press, 2003.

[49] Redecker, Christine. "European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators: DigCompEdu." Publications Office of the European Union, 2017.

[50] Jenkins, Henry, et al. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." The MIT Press, 2009.

[51] Littlejohn, Allison, et al. "Learning in MOOCs: Motivations and Self-Regulated Learning in MOOCs." The Internet and Higher Education 29 (2016): 40-48.

[52] Gee, James Paul. "What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy." Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

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internships in tech firms). In the context of lifelong learning, it is crucial to create educational opportunities for adults and seniors, focused on updating digital skills[53].

Digital media literacy is a key competence nowadays, especially in the context of ubiquitous social media. Developing this literacy not only allows us to effectively take advantage of the digital world and the opportunities offered by ICT, but also to protect ourselves from its potential risks. In a rapidly changing digital environment, continuous learning and critical thinking are essential for informed, active and responsible citizenship in the 21st century.

3.3 Critical media literacy

In today's information-rich era, where we are constantly surrounded by various forms of media, critical media literacy is becoming an increasingly important skill. This ability is defined as the capacity to analyse, evaluate, and interpret media content to understand its context, purpose, and impact, as well as to create media messages in various forms.[54] This literacy encompasses not only the technical skills necessary for accessing media but focuses primarily on the critical evaluation of media content in terms of its truthfulness, objectivity, and ethical standards.

Critical media literacy extends beyond the framework of traditional literacy, i.e., reading and writing, expanding it to include the ability to think critically in the context of the media environment[55] (i.e., to consider how and why media are created, what messages and values they convey, and how they influence individuals and society).

The significance of critical media literacy lies in its ability to equip individuals with tools for navigating the current information world. This skill applies to many areas of daily life. In education, it helps students better understand and interpret learning materials.[56] In the political sphere, it allows citizens to

[53] Eshet-Alkalai, Yoram, and Eran Chajut. "You Can Teach Old Dogs New Tricks: The Factors That Affect Changes over Time in Digital Literacy." Journal of Information Technology Education: Research 9 (2010): 173-181.

[54] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education." In Media Literacy: A Reader, edited by Donaldo Macedo and Shirley R. Steinberg, 3-23. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

[55] Buckingham, David. "Digital Media Literacies: Rethinking Media Education in the Age of the Internet." Research in Comparative and International Education 2, no. 1 (2007): 43-55.

[56] Hobbs, Renee. "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action." Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2010.

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critically evaluate political news and campaigns, which is crucial for informed decision-making in a democratic society.[57] In advertising, it supports the recognition of marketing strategies and hidden messages, leading to more informed consumer behaviour.[58] Last but not least, critical media literacy is essential for using social media, where it helps users distinguish between facts and misinformation.

The importance of critical media literacy is multifaceted. Primarily, it serves as protection against manipulation and disinformation, which are ubiquitous in today's world.[59] Furthermore, it promotes democratic participation by enabling citizens to better understand political processes and media messages.[60] Critical media literacy also significantly contributes to the development of critical thinking, a skill applicable in many aspects of life.[61] Finally, it supports creative expression, as the ability to create one's own media content is part of critical media literacy.[62]

3.4 Key Elements of Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy consists of several key elements.

The first is ***analysis***, the ability to break down media messages into individual components and understand their meaning and function.[63] Every media message is created within a specific context and with a particular purpose. Authors, producers, and editors have their own beliefs, values, and attitudes that can be reflected in their work. Critical thinking helps us uncover these hidden influences and assess how they might affect the information presented. We analyse:

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[57] Mihailidis, Paul. "Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture." New York: Peter Lang, 2014.

[58] Potter, W. James. "Media Literacy." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016.

[59] Livingstone, Sonia. "Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies." The Communication Review 7, no. 1 (2004): 3-14.

[60] Jenkins, Henry, et al. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

[61] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education." Leiden: Brill Sense, 2019.

[62] Buckingham, David. "Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture." Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

[63] Masterman, Len. "Teaching the Media." London: Routledge, 1985.

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- Who is the author of the message? What is their reputation and professional qualification?[64]
- What are the author's possible motivations? What leads them to create this message?[65]
- What values and attitudes are reflected in the message? Are they presented objectively, or is the author trying to promote a particular point of view?[66]

Media messages are not just a collection of facts. They are complex constructions that use various techniques to capture attention and influence the audience. Critical analysis allows us to deconstruct these messages and understand how they work. When interpreting and analysing media content, it is advisable to focus primarily on:

- Language and style: How is the message formulated? What words and phrases are used? What is the tone of the message?[67]
- Visual and audio elements: What images and sounds are used? How do they complement and reinforce the verbal message? How do they affect the audience's emotions and perception?[68]
- Structure and composition: How is the message organised? What information is emphasised and what is downplayed?

Media messages often contain arguments that try to persuade the audience of a particular viewpoint. Critical thinking allows us to assess the logic and evidence used in these arguments. We determine whether the arguments are supported by facts and evidence. Are these sources relevant and reliable? Are the arguments logical and consistent? Do they contain errors in reasoning or manipulative techniques?[69] Are there counterarguments? Are different perspectives considered in the message?

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[64] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education." In Media Literacy: A Reader, edited by Donaldo Macedo and Shirley R. Steinberg, 3-23. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

[65] Buckingham, David. "Digital Media Literacies: Rethinking Media Education in the Age of the Internet." Research in Comparative and International Education 2, no. 1 (2007): 43-55.

[66] Hobbs, Renee. "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action." Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2010.

[67] Mihailidis, Paul. "Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture." New York: Peter Lang, 2014.

[68] Potter, W. James. "Media Literacy." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016.

[69] Jenkins, Henry, et al. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

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The goal of critical thinking is not just passive analysis, but also the active creation of one's own informed opinions. Based on a critical evaluation of information and consideration of different perspectives, we form our own judgement on the topic at hand.

The second element is ***evaluation***, the skill to assess the credibility and quality of information.[70] In the flood of information from various sources, it is not always easy to distinguish which information is true, relevant, and trustworthy. Critical media literacy provides us with tools for the effective evaluation of information and assessment of the credibility of sources. The first step in evaluating information is to verify the source. We find out, for example, who published the information (a reputable organisation, an independent medium, or an anonymous blog)?[71] What is the reputation of the source (history of publishing truthful and objective information)?[72] Does the source have expertise in the given area, is the author of the article an expert on the given topic? Is it a transparent source (are the sources of information stated)?

It is always necessary to perceive information in context; this can be historical, social, political, cultural, or economic. In this respect, it is advisable to notice how the context affects the interpretation of the message, what events and factors could have influenced the creation of the message or, for example, whether there are different perspectives on the given topic.

An important part of critical thinking is the ability to take a critical distance, which is supported by actively seeking information from various sources, comparing and confronting different perspectives,[73] including verifying information and facts from independent sources.

Last but not least, critical thinking helps to recognize disinformation, propaganda, or manipulative techniques and not be influenced by them. In the process of recognizing disinformation, it is advisable to focus on the following:

- **Facts and evidence:** Is the information supported by facts and

[70] Potter, W. James. "Theory of Media Literacy: A Cognitive Approach." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004.

[71] Masterman, Len. "Teaching the Media." London: Routledge, 1985.

[72] Potter, W. James. "Theory of Media Literacy: A Cognitive Approach." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004.

[73] Pariser, Eli. "The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You." New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

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evidence? Can it be verified from independent sources?[74]

- **Emotional language:** Does the message use emotionally charged language that tries to manipulate the audience's emotions?[75]
- **Oversimplification and generalisation:** Does the message oversimplify complex issues and use stereotypes?[76]
- **Hidden motivations:** What are the possible motivations of the author of the message? Are they trying to promote a particular opinion, product, or ideology?

Critical media literacy is not just about passive media consumption, but also active participation in its creation. The third element is ***creation***, the ability to produce one's own media content,[77] which allows for a better understanding of how media works and its impact on society. Creating own media content allows to become an active participant in the media environment (sharing your own thoughts, opinions, and experiences with others, which contributes to public discourse, producing content that informs, educates, and inspires others).

Creating own media content develops creativity and critical thinking (the need to think about what, how, and to whom the message will be communicated and what impact this message may have on others[78]) and helps to better understand how the media works.

Even when creating your own media content, it is important to adhere to ethical principles (respect copyright, do not publish false or misleading information, protect your own privacy and the privacy of others,[50] avoid spreading hatred and discrimination).

The last, but equally important element is ***reflection***, the awareness of one's own role in the media environment and the ability to critically evaluate one's own media consumption and creation.[79]

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[74] Livingstone, Sonia, and Leslie Haddon. "EU Kids Online: Final Report." London: EU Kids Online, 2009.

[75] Aufderheide, Patricia. "Media Literacy: A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy." Aspen, CO: Aspen Institute, 1993.

[76] Schreurs, Kathleen, Anabel Quan-Haase, and Kim Martin. "Problematizing the Digital Literacy Paradox in the Context of Older Adults' ICT Use: Aging, Media Discourse, and Self-Determination." Canadian Journal of Communication 42, no. 2 (2017): 359-377.

[77] Hobbs, Renee. "Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy." Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

[78] Schreurs, Kathleen, Anabel Quan-Haase, and Kim Martin. "Problematizing the Digital Literacy Paradox in the Context of Older Adults' ICT Use: Aging, Media Discourse, and Self-Determination." Canadian Journal of Communication 42, no. 2 (2017): 359-377.

[79] Buckingham, David. "The Media Education Manifesto." Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

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This involves taking a conscious step back to examine how media influences your thoughts, behaviours, and perceptions. Media can shape our opinions and influence our actions.[80] It can be helpful to consider how exposure to certain media content may affect our thinking and behaviour.[81]

Examining your media habits is another important aspect of reflection.[82] This includes assessing how much time you spend each day engaging with various forms of media, such as social media, television, and online news sources.[83] It also involves recognizing the types of media you typically consume.[84] Active engagement with diverse perspectives and sources is encouraged, rather than relying solely on familiar channels.

Evaluating how critically you approach media messages is also essential.[85] This means taking the time to verify information and considering different viewpoints, even those that challenge your own beliefs.[86] Recognizing the potential for manipulation within media content is key to developing critical media literacy skills.[87]

Finally, reflecting on your own behaviour as a media user is vital.[88] This includes considering the potential impact of your posts and online contributions on

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[80] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education." In *Media Literacy: A Reader*, edited by Donaldo Macedo and Shirley R. Steinberg, 3-23. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

[81] Buckingham, David. "Digital Media Literacies: Rethinking Media Education in the Age of the Internet." *Research in Comparative and International Education* 2, no. 1 (2007): 43-55.

[82] Hobbs, Renee. "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action." Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2010.

[83] Mihailidis, Paul. "Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture." New York: Peter Lang, 2014.

[84] Potter, W. James. "Media Literacy." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016.

[85] Livingstone, Sonia. "Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies." *The Communication Review* 7, no. 1 (2004): 3-14.

[86] Jenkins, Henry, et al. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

[87] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education." Leiden: Brill Sense, 2019.

[88] Buckingham, David. "Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture." Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

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others.[89] Respecting privacy and contributing to a positive online environment are important aspects of responsible media use.[90]

By thoughtfully reflecting on these aspects of media consumption and creation, individuals can gain valuable insights into their relationship with media.[91] This awareness empowers them to make more informed choices, fostering a more mindful and responsible approach to navigating today's complex media landscape.[92]

3.5 Ethical and Responsible Use of Social Media

Social media has become an integral part of our lives. It offers a platform for communication, sharing information, and self-expression. At the same time, however, it also brings new ethical challenges. Critical media literacy helps us navigate this environment and behave responsibly. The relationship between critical media literacy and social media is particularly significant today. Social media present specific challenges for critical media literacy ~~for several reasons~~. The rapid spread of information on these platforms requires the ability to critically evaluate instantly.[93] Personalised algorithms that determine what content users see can create information bubbles (content filtered based on previous activities, preferences and online interactions), emphasising the need to actively seek out information from different sources and perspectives.[94] The large amount of user-generated content emphasises the ability to verify information sources.[95]

Moreover, the interactive nature of social media requires ethical behaviour in the online environment and awareness of the impact of one's own contributions.

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[89] Masterman, Len. "Teaching the Media." London: Routledge, 1985.

[90] Potter, W. James. "Theory of Media Literacy: A Cognitive Approach." Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004.

[91] Hobbs, Renee. "Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy." Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

[92] Livingstone, Sonia, and Leslie Haddon. "EU Kids Online: Final Report." London: EU Kids Online, 2009.

[93] Livingstone, Sonia. "Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation: Teenagers' Use of Social Networking Sites for Intimacy, Privacy and Self-Expression." New Media & Society 10, no. 3 (2008): 393-411.

[94] Pariser, Eli. "The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You." New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

[95] Jenkins, Henry. "Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide." New York: New York University Press, 2006.

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Every post on social media, whether it is a comment, a shared article, or a photo, has the potential to influence others. Online activity has an impact on the real world, which is why everyone should answer these questions:

- What impact can my post have on others?[96]
- Am I spreading true and verified information?[97]
- Am I expressing myself with respect for others?[98]
- Am I contributing to a positive online environment?

Privacy is a fundamental human right that must be respected even in the online environment. This includes:

- Not disclosing personal information about yourself or others without their consent.
- Respecting privacy settings on social media.
- Not using photos and videos of others without their permission.
- Avoiding online stalking and cyberbullying.

Critical media literacy is important for all age groups. For children and youth, it is key for safe navigation in the digital world and for developing critical thinking from an early age.[99] For adults, it is essential for informed decision-making in personal and professional life.[100] For seniors, critical media literacy is particularly important for protection against online fraud and misinformation, which often target this age group.[101]

Developing critical media literacy requires a systematic approach. In formal education, integrating this skill into school curricula across various subjects is

[96] boyd, danah. "It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens." New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

[97] Buckingham, David. "The Media Education Manifesto." Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

[98] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education." In Media Literacy: A Reader, edited by Donaldo Macedo and Shirley R. Steinberg, 3-23. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

[99] Livingstone, Sonia, and Leslie Haddon. "EU Kids Online: Final Report." London: EU Kids Online, 2009.

[100] Aufderheide, Patricia. "Media Literacy: A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy." Aspen, CO: Aspen Institute, 1993.

[101] Schreurs, Kathleen, Anabel Quan-Haase, and Kim Martin. "Problematizing the Digital Literacy Paradox in the Context of Older Adults' ICT Use: Aging, Media Discourse, and Self-Determination." Canadian Journal of Communication 42, no. 2 (2017): 359-377.

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crucial.[102] Non-formal education, such as workshops, seminars, and online courses, can complement and expand this knowledge.[103] Practical activities, such as analysing media messages and creating one's own content, are essential for reinforcing these skills.[104] Open discussions about media topics also play an important role, supporting critical thinking and the exchange of ideas.[105]

In conclusion, critical media literacy is an essential skill for the 21st century. Its development is key to creating an informed and critically thinking society capable of facing the challenges of the current media environment. In an era where we are constantly inundated with information from various sources, the ability to critically evaluate media messages is not only useful but directly necessary for full participation in modern society.[106]

[102] Hobbs, Renee. "Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom." Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2011.

[103] Mihailidis, Paul. "Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture." New York: Peter Lang, 2014.

[104] Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. "Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core Concepts, Debates, Organizations, and Policy." Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education 26, no. 3 (2005): 369-386.

[105] Hobbs, Renee. "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement." Journal of Communication 48, no. 1 (1998): 16-32.

[106] Buckingham, David. "The Media Education Manifesto." Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

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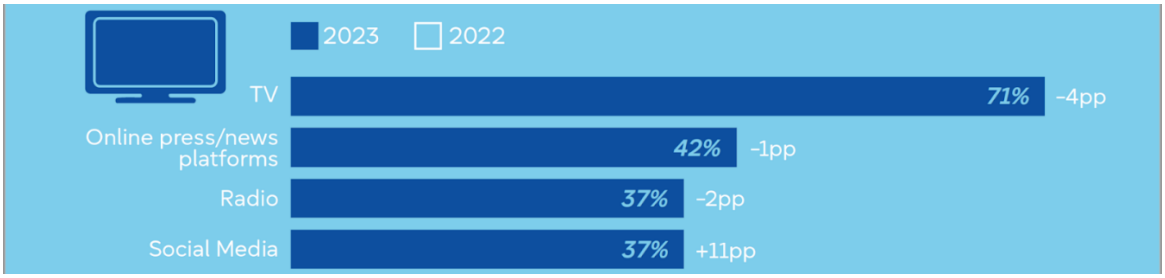
4. Literacy in Europe

4.1 Media Literacy in Europe

According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, the Media use index in the 27 European Union Countries is "low" or "poor" for the 34% of respondents.[107]

About the use of social media, the Flash Eurobarometer Media & News Survey of 2023 takes an in-depth look at media habits, including trust in different media sources.

For 71% of respondents, TV was one of their most used media to access news in the past days. TV is followed by online press and/or news platforms (42%). Radio and social media platforms (both 37%) are on shared third position followed by the written press (21%).[108]Compared to the Media and News survey conducted in 2022, there is an increase observed, in all age groups, in the overall share of respondents mentioning social media platforms to access news.



About the most trusted media sources, 48% of EU citizens select public TV and radio stations (including online ones) as a news source they trust most. This is followed by the written press (including online press), trusted by 38% of respondents, while private TV and radio stations are mentioned by 29%.

[107] Standard Eurobarometer 96, Winter 2021-2022, Public opinion in the European Union, available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553

[108] Flash Eurobarometer - Media & News Survey, 2023 available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3153

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The report also examines the most used online social media platforms and social media activities (information, communication, etc.). Online social media platforms - Facebook (selected by 63%) and WhatsApp (62%) are the most-commonly used online social media platforms asked about in this survey. Facebook is the most frequently selected social media platform in 17 Member States; moreover, in all but one Member State, this platform is mentioned by more than half of respondents (from 55% in Austria to 83% in Hungary, 49% in Germany). WhatsApp is the highest-ranking platform in ten Member States, such as Spain (82%), the Netherlands and Italy (both 81%). In Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia and Cyprus, a majority of respondents report using Viper (between 51% and 64%). Instagram,TikTok, Telegram, Snapchat, Twitter are more common for 15-24 year-olds. For example, while 1% of 55+ year-olds select TikTok, this proportion increases to 55% for 15-24 year-olds. A comparison with the Media and News survey conducted in 2022 shows that the use of Facebook continues to decline, especially among 15-24 year-olds, while the use of TikTok has increased across all age groups.

Among the activities realised through social media: 49% of respondents use social media for communication purposes – to send direct messages to friends and family – and 47% reply they use these media for information purposes – to follow the news and current events. Other activities frequently selected are watching photo and video content (43%) and following what friends/family/colleagues are doing (43%). Younger respondents tend to use social media to watch photo and video content: 57% of 15-24 year-olds mentioned this purpose compared to 34% of 55+ year-olds. Similarly, 52% of 15-24 years-olds follow what friends/family/colleagues are doing compared to 40% of 55+ years-old. Young respondents are, for example, also more likely to use social media to play videogames. Compared to the Media and News survey conducted in 2022, there are small increases in the proportion of respondents reporting to use social media for the various activities listed in the survey (for following news and current events). These small increases are seen across all age groups.

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4.2 Fake news in Europe

Despite the increase in social media usage, it is important to highlight that trust in the media has not increased or even decreased.

According to Eurobarometer, 39% of respondents stated that they have low or no trust in the media, with an increase of 2% from the previous year[109]. In fact, 35% of Europeans who responded does not believe that the media in their country provide trustworthy information.

In times of crisis, challenges related to the spread of disinformation and harmful content increase, putting strain on our democracies and individuals' wellbeing.

Fake news can take the form of misinformation and disinformation. The latter is the deliberate spreading of false information to deceive an audience, while misinformation can be unintentional. Whilst disinformation is particularly worrying, both forms of fake news are problematic because many Europeans are unable to tell whether a story is real or false.

According to the same report, 70% of European respondents also shared that they often come across news or information that they believe to misrepresent reality or even be false often. Only 62% of the respondents across the 27 European Union member states stated that it is easy for them to identify news or information that they believe misrepresent reality or are even false.

This has led to the previously mentioned lack of trust in the media. Citizens trust traditional media such as print, TV and radio, and their online presence, more than online news platforms and social media. In relation to the different channels used to access news, 56% of respondents believe that the radio provides truthful news, followed by the public TV and the written press (49%), the Internet (35%) and online social networks (20%).

Additionally, 80% of respondents believe that the existence of news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false is a problem for democracy in general; 78% of respondents also believe that the problem concerns their own country.

According to the Democracy Report in Flash Eurobarometer 522, when asked about the most important elements of free and fair electoral campaigns, the largest shares of EU citizens select 'debates and campaigns avoiding hate speech, manipulation and lies' (46%) and 'candidates and political parties having

[109] Standard Eurobarometer 96, Winter 2021-2022, Public opinion in the European Union, available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553

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equal opportunity to access the media' (41%).[110]

When asked how frequently respondents think they have been exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past seven days, about a third answer they have been exposed 'very often' (13%) or 'often' (22%). A similar proportion (33%) think they have 'sometimes' been exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past seven days. Online social networks (selected by 64% on average across the EU) are by far the most cited media where respondents expect to encounter disinformation or fake news. More than a third of EU citizens (36%) consider it likely to encounter disinformation or fake news on television and about a fifth reply the same about online newspapers and news magazines (22%) or about video hosting websites (21%).

Information about certain topics is more susceptible to being skewed or misrepresented than others. For example, an analysis found that close to 60 percent of misinformation posts recommended by Instagram over a two-month period contained content about COVID-19. In fact, the coronavirus was the news topic most subject to false information in Europe according to a survey in early 2022. Additionally, almost 35% of European consumers reported witnessing false information about politics, and around 20% said the same about celebrities, immigration, and climate change respectively.

Fake celebrity news can be harmful to the individual in question (and their reputation) and is a problem which should be taken seriously. Meanwhile, false information about major health, political, and environmental issues has the potential to mislead the public on a huge scale, and can influence not only citizen's opinions, but also their behaviour and decisions. This can be avoided if consumers aim to be savvy in their news consumption, but identifying fake news is challenging for many, and can be time-consuming and frustrating. Most Europeans also believe that the problem of fake news will get worse in years to come, and additional pressure on audiences to decipher fact from fiction in the content they read will likely cause media trust to deteriorate.[111]

In 2021, 47% of all people aged 16-74 years in the EU saw untrue or doubtful information on news websites or social media during the 3 months prior to the survey. However, only around a quarter

[110] Flash Eurobarometer 522 Democracy Report, March 2023, available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2966

[111] Watson Amy, Fake news in Europe - statistics & facts, 10 January 2024, https://proxy.parisjc.edu:8293/topics/5833/fake-news-in-europe/#topicOverview

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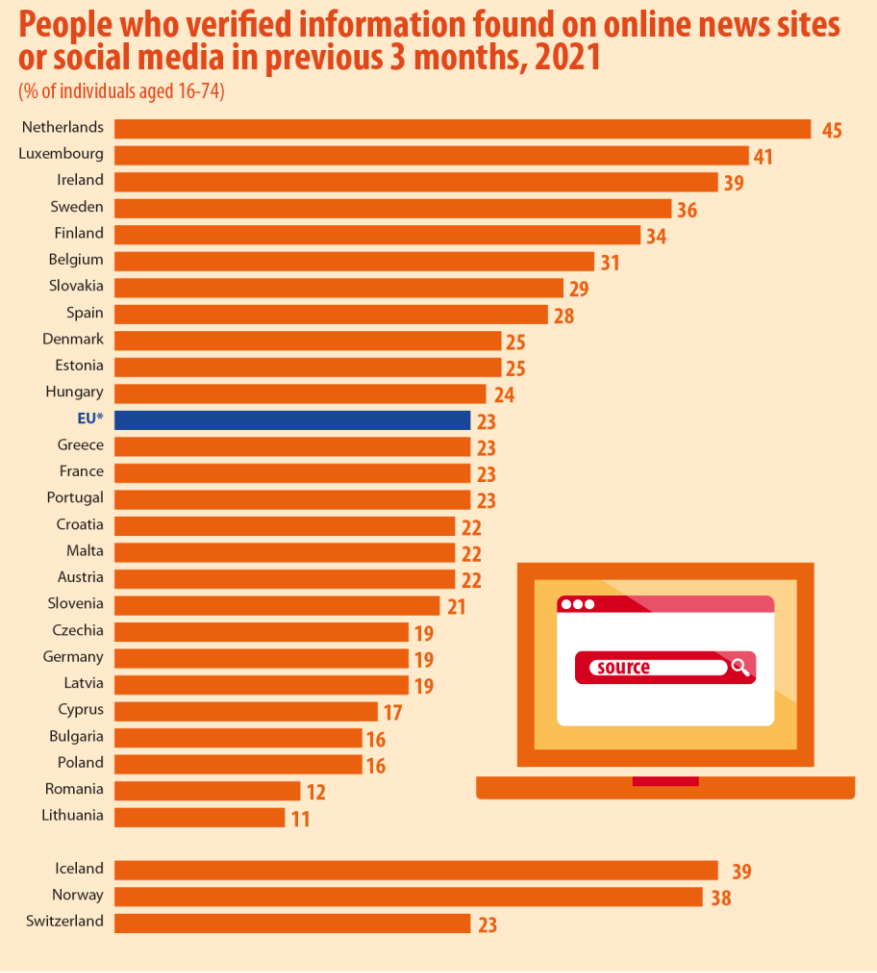
(23%) of people verified the truthfulness of the information or content.[112]



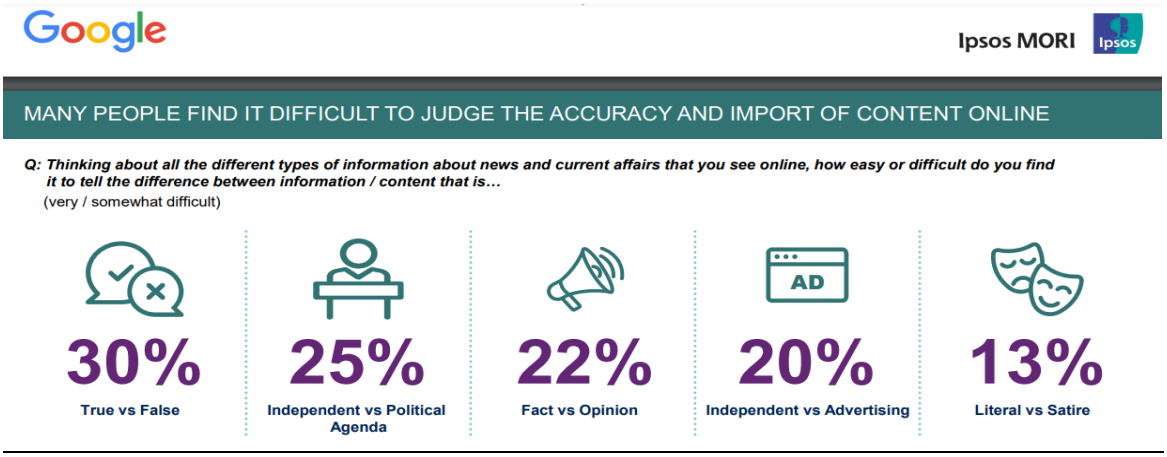
The share of people aged 16-74 years old who verified information found on online news sites or social media in the previous 3 months was largest in the Netherlands (45%), followed by Luxembourg (41%) and Ireland (39%). However, the smallest share was recorded in Lithuania (11%), followed by Romania (12%) and Poland (16%).

In the EU, people aged 16-74 years old primarily checked if the information was truthful by checking the sources or finding other information on the internet (20%). People also checked information

[112] Eurostat News articles, How many people verified online information in 2021?, 16 December 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211216-3

by discussing it with other persons offline, or using sources not on the internet (12%). The least popular method was checking by following or taking part in an internet discussion regarding the information (7%).

An Ipsos Mori study on behalf of Google. was carried out between 6 January and 27 March 2020, in the form of an online self-completion survey among the general public of 11 European Countries, to explore general public attitudes towards misinformation, the difficulties people experience online and what remedies, if any, they favour.



As can be seen from the infographic from the Ipsos Mori study from March 2021, 30% of those interviewed show difficulty in understanding whether a content is true or false, others claim to struggle to understand whether the information is politically influenced, if it is sponsored, if it is based on real data or if it is connected to the field of satire.

According to research, when trying to understand whether a news or information online is true or false, the public chooses to do these actions (in order of preference):

- Read how other media organisations have reported the story
- Go back to the original source of the information
- Do some research on the media organisation that has reported the story
- Check the publication date
- Check if the headline accurately reflects the rest of the story
- Use a fact-checking website
- Read the comments
- Look at the quality of the language.

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4.3 Media literacy education

Media literacy is also an essential partner to regulation in terms of improving the public's ability to navigate the online world. Many regulations will be less effective without an accompanying level of education and awareness, and there is clear scope to expand this. The Ipsos Mori study[113] from March 2021 found that just 9% of Europeans (from 11 countries) have participated in training about how to use online tools to distinguish between true and false information, but 58% are interested in doing so, with less than a third in any country having received such training to date.

Furthermore, according to the interview, 61% of the interviewees would be interested in following a free online training course to help them distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information online, 26% at a library, 23% at the university, 21% at a local school, 19% at a tech company and 16% at a media publisher.

It's desirable to raise general media literacy levels in order to increase the public's resilience to online disinformation because it's necessary to counter the tendency that sees media literacy as the solution to a specific problem such as disinformation (or hate speech, online safety, radicalisation, digital inclusion, etc). This can be problematic as it narrows the focus, and leads to short-term thinking, instead of long-term planning.

4.4 Digital literacy in Europe

The European Commission's open data portal analyses the level of digital literacy (Data literacy) in Europe. The report, which interviewed over 100,000 people in 28 EU countries, found that overall levels of digital literacy are increasing, but there are still significant disparities between different countries and population groups[114]. The report found that there are still significant gaps in digital literacy. For example, only 60% of people in Europe can use a computer to create documents or spreadsheets, and only 40% can use a computer to solve problems. These skills are becoming increasingly important in the workplace, and the report found that people with these skills are more likely to be employed.

To be improved, digital skills have to be measured. One of the most comprehensive attempts to quantify the digital skills of EU citizens is made by

[113] Archer Henry, Media Literacy Survey, conducted by Ipsos on behalf of Google, 2021, https://www.ipsos.com/en/online-media-literacy-across-world-demand-training-going-unmet

[114] Infodata, Digital literacy in Europa. Il caso Italia, Il Sole 24 ore, 30th December 2023

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Eurostat, which provides several datasets about digital skills that cover topics related to ICT in terms of the number of users, specialists and training initiatives.[115]

One of the key tools derived from these datasets is the Digital Skills Indicator 2.0 (DSI), which is a measure of digital competence. Designed by the Joint Research Council of the European Commission, DSI is an indicator that feeds into the annual Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) report, which comes out each year, tracking EU Member States' progress on digital development, including digital skills.[116] As mentioned in its metadata, the DSI is based on selected activities related to internet or software use that individuals aged 16 to 74 perform in five specific areas: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and problem solving. For each of the five areas, two levels of skills are computed that result in a score of 'basic' or 'above basic'. Therefore, the DSI is an aggregated measure of how many people have a certain level of digital competence out of the total.

When looking at the individual level of those skills[117], it is possible to map them in several dimensions. According to Eurostat, one very important dimension is geography: digital skills change significantly across the EU Member States. In 2023, 55% of people in the EU aged 16 to 74 had at least basic overall digital skills. There are significant disparities across the EU, with rates ranging from 83% in the Netherlands to 28% in Romania.

[115] Mancino Davide, Digital literacy in the EU: An overview, 2023, Retrieved from: https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/digital-literacy-eu-overview

[116] Vuorikari, R., Jerzak, N., Karpinski, Z., Pokropek, A. and Tudek, J., Measuring Digital Skills across the EU: Digital Skills Indicator 2.0, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, doi:10.2760/897803, JRC130341.

[117] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/isoc_sk_dskl_i21/default/table?lang=en

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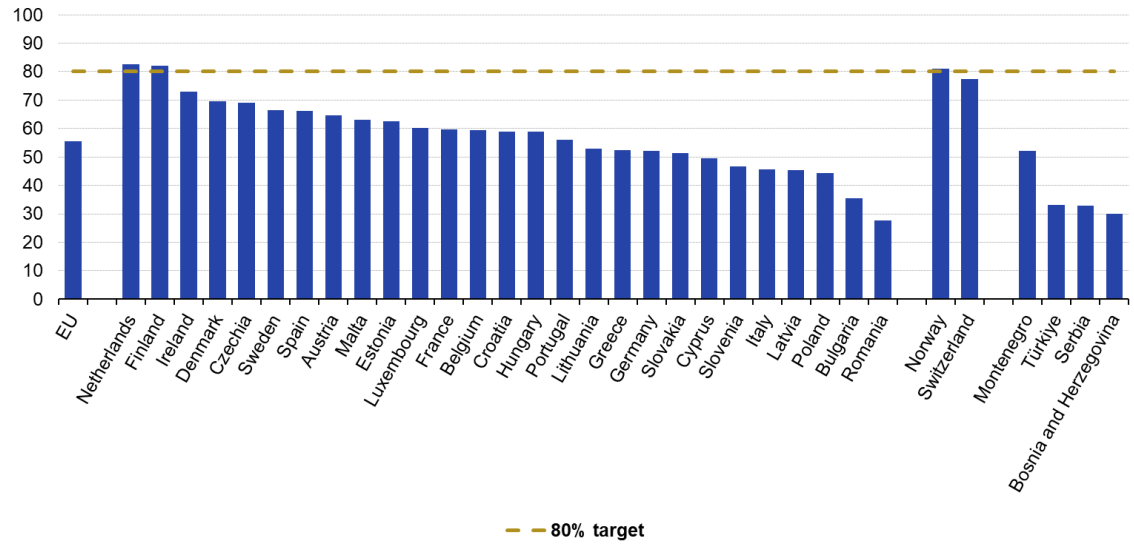
Individuals with at least basic digital skills, 2023
(% of individuals aged 16-74)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: isoc_sk_dskl_i21)

Looking at the level of digital skills in more detail reveals that it is heavily influenced by socio-demographic factors.[118] People aged 65 and over have the lowest levels of digital skills: only 28 % of people aged 65-74 possess at least basic digital skills, meanwhile, 70 % of the "digital natives" aged 16-24 do so, as was the case for the age group 25-34. While men have slightly higher digital skills when looking at the overall numbers (57 % with at least basic digital skills, versus 54 % of women), the gender gap varies strongly by age group. In the age groups 16-24, 25-34, and 35-44, more young women have at least basic digital skills than their male counterparts. Among people aged 45 or over, the situation is reversed, and the shares are higher among men – with the gender gap widening in the older age groups.

A big impact on individuals' levels of digital skills can also be seen by their level of formal education. People with higher levels of education tend to have higher levels of digital literacy than people with lower levels of education, varying between 80 % for those with high formal education and 34 % for those with no or low formal education.

[118] Eurostat, Statistics explained, Skills for the digital age, April 2024, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Skills_for_the_digital_age#The_digital_divide

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5. EU direction and policy on digital transition and media literacy

Europe is facing the digital transition through several documents about the correct use of digital devices and how to manage in an inclusive and accessible way the innovations and the changes that have occurred and have redefined how we communicate, shop and access information online, making them daily essentials. Considering the high number of studies, Initiatives, Resolutions, Action Plans, Recommendations, Regulations, Directives and Strategies on the digital sector, it seems that it is considered fundamental for the life of European citizens and a driving force towards progress and the fair and sustainable development of European Society.

5.1 The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens

In order to deal with the concept of digital competence in a clear and orderly manner, the **DigComp 2.2: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens - With new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes**, developed by the Joint Research Center of the European Commission, provides a common understanding of what digital competence is.

The European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp) has evolved over time, with the first version published in 2013[119] and the latest version being DigComp 2.2, which integrates knowledge related to emerging technologies like artificial intelligence.

From 2013 up until now, DigComp has been used for multiple purposes, particularly in the context of employment, education and training, and lifelong learning. It has been put into practice at EU level to construct the Digital Skills Indicator (DSI), which is used for setting policy-targets and to monitor the Digital Economy and Society (DESI). It has also been incorporated into the Europass CV enabling jobseekers to evaluate their own digital competence and include the evaluation in their Curriculum Vitaes.[120]

[119] Punie, Y. and Brecko, B., editor(s), Ferrari, A., DIGCOMP: A Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe. , EUR 26035, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2013, ISBN 978-92-79-31465-0, doi:10.2788/52966, JRC83167.

[120] Vuorikari, R., Kluzer, S. and Punie, Y., DigComp 2.2: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens - With new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes, EUR 31006 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, ISBN 978-92-76-48882-8, doi:10.2760/115376, JRC128415

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In DigComp, the following five competence areas outline what the digital competence entails:

1. Information and data literacy: Knowing how to interpret data critically is a fundamental key to moving with awareness within the digital environment. It is crucial to be aware that online environments contain all types of information, it is therefore necessary to be careful of disinformation content.
2. Communication and collaboration: The second area of competence encompasses all the skills that concern interaction and communication through digital technologies together with what these skills imply at a social level. For example, it is important to be aware that many communication services and digital environments (e.g. social media) use mechanisms such as nudging, gamification and manipulation to influence user behaviour.
3. Digital content creation: The skills of those who want to create content go beyond the simple use of the tool and the possibility of programming. They include the ability to edit content already existing to create something new and the understanding of copyright and ownership.
4. Safety: When we talk about security, we are referring to the awareness of the risks that arise when surfing the net with our devices. The risks are not only related to malware or the loss of personal data, but are increasingly insinuating themselves into the emotional, psychological and physical sphere of people. It is important to be aware of the importance of balancing the use of digital technologies with non-use as an option, as many different factors in digital life can impact personal health, well-being and life satisfaction, and to be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.
5. Problem solving: The problem-solving area of expertise allows citizens to gain greater awareness of the systems they use and ensures that they are able to respond efficiently to technical problems that may arise during work, study or free time spent online. People should understand where one's own digital competence needs to be improved or updated, seeking opportunities for self-development and to keep up-to-date with the digital evolution.

Knowing how to interpret data critically is a fundamental key to moving with awareness within the digital environment. It is crucial to be aware that online environments contain all types of information and content including misinformation and disinformation.

The second area of competence encompasses all the skills that concern interaction and communication through

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digital technologies together with what these skills imply at a social level. For example, it is important to be aware that many communication services and digital environments (e.g. social media) use mechanisms such as nudging, gamification and manipulation to influence user behaviour.

The skills of those who want to create content go beyond the simple use of the tool and the possibility of programming. They include the ability to edit content already existing to create something new and the understanding of copyright and ownership.

When talking about safety, the four sub-competences concern awareness of the risks that arise when surfing the web with one's devices. The risks do not only concern malware or the loss of personal data, but are increasingly insinuating themselves into the emotional, psychological and physical sphere of people. It is important to be aware of the importance of balancing the use of digital technologies with non-use as an option, as many different factors in digital life can impact on personal health, wellbeing and life satisfaction, and to be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.

Finally, the problem-solving area of expertise allows citizens to gain greater awareness of the systems they use and ensures that they are able to respond efficiently to technical problems that may arise during work, study or free time spent online. People should understand where one's own digital competence needs to be improved or updated, seeking opportunities for self-development and to keep up-to-date with the digital evolution.

The integrated DigComp 2.2 framework provides more than 250 new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes that help citizens engage confidently, critically and safely with digital technologies, and new and emerging ones such as systems driven by artificial intelligence (AI).

The second part of the publication gives a snapshot of the existing reference material for DigComp consolidating previously released publications and references and includes various tools for self-reflection, monitoring and certification of digital competence.

5.2 EU strategies and policies on digital education and digital media literacy

Considering the importance of Media literacy, which empowers citizens of all ages to navigate the news environment, enabling informed decisions in the digital era there have been implemented initiatives towards improved media literacy, in order to improve this crucial skills in citizens of all ages, enhancing their critical thinking and ability to better

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navigate in the digital media environment and identify disinformation. Among the EU initiatives there is the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) requiring Member States to promote and take measures to develop media literacy skills and to report on their efforts every three years.

In line with the revised AVMSD, the Commission has issued guidelines for Member States when reporting on the measures for promoting and developing media literacy skills.[121] The guidelines also aim to help Member States share best practices on media literacy. The first set of national reports are available for the period 2020-2022. The revised AVMSD also requires video-sharing platforms to provide effective media literacy measures and tools. This is a key requirement due to the role of video-sharing platforms play in giving access to audiovisual content. Platforms are also required to raise users' awareness of these measures and tools.

The critical nature of media literacy and the need to strengthen it is also recognised in the **European Democracy Action Plan** (EDAP) and in the **Media and Audiovisual Action Plan** (MAAP). Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation, including through digital and media literacy, is also one of the strategic priorities of the Digital Education Action Plan.

Under the **2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation**[122], major online platforms and other signatories have committed to strengthen media literacy and critical thinking. More specifically, the signatories have committed to designing media literacy tools that aim to empower users by providing context for the content visible on their services. Additionally, they have pledged to develop, promote, and support activities that improve media literacy and critical thinking among the general public in the EU. The signatories regularly report on their actions to fulfil this commitment. These reports, which detail their implementation efforts, are available in the Transparency centre of the Code. The Code aims to become a Code of Conduct under the Digital Services Act, forming part of its co-regulatory regime.

[121] European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Communication from the Commission. Guidelines pursuant to Article 33a(3) of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive on the scope of Member States' reports concerning measures for the promotion and development of media literacy skills, (2023/C 66/02). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023XC0223%2801%29&qid=1720775146249

[122] The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation

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The European Commission brings together the representatives of EU Member States in a Media literacy expert group. The group meets twice every year to:

- identify, document and extend good practices in the field of media literacy;
- explore ways of coordinating EU policies, support programmes and media literacy initiatives;
- build synergies between the media literacy activities of Member States.

The European Commission supports the work of the **European Digital Media observatory** (EDMO), which brings together fact-checkers, media literacy experts and academic researchers to join forces in the fight against disinformation. EDMO contributes to identifying best practices in the field of media literacy, promoting knowledge exchange among practitioners, policy makers and other experts across Europe, and delivering media literacy campaigns to increase citizens' awareness and societal resilience. For example, EDMO conducted the online Be Election Smart campaign in all EU languages to increase awareness of disinformation risks during the 2024 European Elections.

EDMO also relies on an EU-wide network of national and regional hubs, which develop and support targeted media literacy campaigns to raise awareness and build societal resilience on the ground.

EDMO's activities include:

- Mapping Fact-Checking Organizations: Supporting joint and cross-border activities and providing training modules;
- Supporting Research: Coordinating research activities on disinformation and creating a repository of peer-reviewed scientific articles;
- Public Portal: Providing information and materials to increase awareness, build resilience to online disinformation, and support media literacy campaigns;
- Supporting Public Authorities: Assisting in monitoring policies put in place by online platforms to limit the spread of disinformation.

Furthermore, the Commission supports media literacy through multiple funding initiatives. Examples of these are the cross-border media literacy projects under Creative Europe and the media literacy projects through Erasmus+.

5.3 The Role of Education in Media Literacy and the Promotion of Critical Thinking in the European Union

Council Conclusions of 30 May 2016 on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education

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and training - Media literacy and critical thinking: the role of education[123]: Media literacy plays a fundamental role for active engagement in democratic life. It refers to people's ability to access, understand, create and critically evaluate different types of media. This concept is crucial in the digital age, where digital competence, which includes the confident, creative and critical use of information and communication technologies, is an essential component of media literacy. However, 40% of European Union citizens do not have adequate digital skills.

To promote media literacy and critical thinking, the European Union encourages education and training to help young people develop digital skills and become responsible citizens of the future. Educators and trainers should openly discuss controversial issues in the classroom, while staff must acquire the knowledge necessary to access, interpret, produce and use multimedia content responsibly.

To promote media literacy and critical thinking, funds and programs such as Erasmus+, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), the European Structural and Investment Funds, Horizon 2020, Creative Europe and CERV must be used by countries of the EU and by the European Commission.

The digital agenda for Europe 2020-2030[124] addresses the profound changes and innovations that are influencing our society and have redefined how we communicate, shop and access information online, making them daily essentials.

The EU aims to empower businesses and people in a human-centred, sustainable and more prosperous digital future. Following the Lisbon strategy, the 2010 digital agenda for Europe underscored ICTs as pivotal for achieving the EU's objectives. There was a first Digital Agenda for Europe 2010-2020 reducing communication prices and eliminating roaming charges, enhancing internet connectivity and ensuring consumer protection through privacy. Furthermore, it emphasised digital growth by promoting digital skills, high-performance computing, industry digitisation, AI development and public service modernisation. In addition, the EU established rules on geo-blocking and digital service portability, enabling

[123] Council of the European Union, COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS of 30 May 2016 on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training, Official Journal of the European Union, 2016

[124] Petit A., Wala Z., Ciucci M., Martinello B., Digital agenda for Europe, 2024, Retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/64/digital-agenda-for-europe

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consumers to access online content across the EU.

The second digital agenda 2020-2030 addresses the changes brought about by digital technologies and the vital role of digital services and markets, emphasising the EU's technological and geopolitical goals. It focuses on:

1. Data,
2. Artificial Intelligence (White Paper on Artificial Intelligence and AI Act),
3. Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act,
4. E-government, e-identity and digital euro,
5. Cybersecurity,
6. Media and democracy,
7. Education and skills,
8. Working conditions in platform work,
9. Digital infrastructure, with the aim of fostering the innovation, security and resilience of digital infrastructure.

Concerning Media and Democracy, in December 2020, a Commission Communication outlined an action plan to support the recovery and transformation of the media sector in Europe. It stressed the need for increased national support and highlighted the disruptive influence of global online platforms on the media, in particular their dominance of data and advertising markets. The European Democracy Action Plan complements the aforementioned Media Plan and focuses on strengthening the digital adaptation of the sector, media freedom and pluralism, and fighting disinformation. It also highlights the decline of media freedom due to increasing threats against journalists.

The EU also emphasises digital education: **the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)**[125] helps the Member States to adapt their education systems to the digital era. It prioritises creating a robust digital education ecosystem and enhancing skills for digital transformation.

It is a renewed European Union (EU) policy initiative that sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the Member States' adaptation of their education and training systems to the digital age. It was adopted on 30 September 2020 and it is a call for greater cooperation at European level on digital education to address the challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to present opportunities for the education and training community (teachers, students),

[125] European Commission, 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, 2018

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policy makers, academia and researchers on national, EU and international level.

The Digital Education Action Plan sets out two strategic priorities and fourteen actions to support them. The priorities are:

1. Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem;
2. Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation.

In particular Action 7, addressing Priority 2, includes Common guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training. These guidelines provide hands-on guidance for primary and secondary school teachers and educators in different subjects and with different levels of experience and knowledge in the field, including practical tips and activity plans. The Guidelines aim to generate a broader understanding of digital literacy achieved through education and training, to promote responsible and safe use of digital technologies, and to foster a better public awareness and knowledge regarding disinformation. They are accompanied by a final report which brings together the Expert Group's main findings and recommendations[126].

The 2030 Digital Compass is a plan of interventions to achieve the digital transformation of EU countries, presented by the European Commission on 9 March 2021. The plan develops the so-called **"European digital decade"**[127], from 2021 to 2030. The new program for Europe's digital development was born after the pandemic, which has made us understand the importance of digital, for individual citizens, for businesses, for the relationships with the public administration. It also highlighted the limits that member countries have on the technological front. Vulnerabilities of the digital space, dependence on foreign technologies and the effects of disinformation on our societies are some of the points highlighted by the Commission.

From these considerations arise the objectives that the EU intends to pursue through the 2030 Digital Compass. First of all, there is that of guaranteeing Europe's digital sovereignty. This means

[126] European Commission, Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022

[127] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2030, Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade, 2021

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eliminating Europe's digital dependence on foreign powers (states or private Big Techs) and guaranteeing the security and resilience of its digital ecosystems and related supply chains. The key points addressed are: digital skills, digital infrastructures, digitalisation of businesses, digitalisation of public services.

The Digital Decade policy programme 2030 sets up an annual cooperation cycle to achieve the common objectives and targets, involving the Commission and Member States. The Commission has developed EU-level trajectories. Baseline trajectories outline how the EU will progress according to current trends, and projected trajectories outline the path that yearly progress should follow to achieve the targets by 2030. The difference between the estimated trends and the ideal path will allow the Commission to monitor the gap in the effort needed. The Commission shall review the targets by 2026 to take stock of technological, economic and societal developments. To reach the digital targets and objectives, the European Commission will accelerate and facilitate the launch of multi-country projects, large-scale projects that no single Member State could develop on its own. The Commission has identified an initial list of multi-country projects, which includes areas for investment such as data infrastructure, low-power processors, 5G communication, high-performance computing, secure quantum communication, public administration, blockchain, digital innovation hubs, digital skills and cybersecurity.

The Commission is conducting an annual Eurobarometer survey to monitor the follow-up measures in the Member States. The Eurobarometer Report "The Digital Decade" [128] was published in July 2024.

On 15 December 2022, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen signed the **European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles**, together with the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala for the rotating Council presidency. The Declaration, put forward by the Commission in January 2022, presents the EU's commitment to a secure, safe and sustainable digital transformation that puts people at the centre, in line with core EU values and fundamental rights. The digital rights and principles outlined in the Declaration complement existing rights, such as those rooted in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and data protection and privacy legislation. They provide a reference framework for citizens on their digital

[128] Special Eurobarometer 551 on 'the digital decade' 2024, July 2024, available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3174

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rights, as well as guidance for EU Member States and for companies when dealing with new technologies. They are intended to help everyone in the EU get the most out of the digital transformation.

In this document the EU Institutions, when addressing the issue Digital education, training and skills, state that "Everyone has the right to education, training and lifelong learning and should be able to acquire all basic and advanced digital skills." and commit to "supporting efforts that allow all learners and teachers to acquire and share the necessary digital skills and competences, including media literacy, and critical thinking, to take an active part in the economy, society, and in democratic processes". Also, when addressing the issue Protection and empowerment of children and young people in the digital environment, they commit to "providing opportunities to all children and young people to acquire the necessary skills and competences, including media literacy and critical thinking, in order to navigate and engage in the digital environment actively, safely and to make informed choices". Furthermore, when addressing the issue Participation in the digital public space, they state that everyone should have access to a trustworthy digital environment, that everyone has the right to freedom of expression and information in the digital environment, and that everyone should be able to access information on who owns or controls the media services they are using. Tho this end, thay commit to: continuing safeguarding all fundamental rights online, notably the freedom of expression and information, including media freedom and pluralism; taking proportionate measures to tackle all forms of illegal content, in full respect for fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of expression and information; creating a digital environment where people are protected against disinformation and information manipulation and other forms of harmful content.[129]

The Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL) introduced by Regulation (EU) 2021/694[130] is an EU funding programme focused on bringing digital technology to businesses, citizens and public administrations. It provides strategic funding to answer the challenges

[129] Joint Declarations European Parliament, Council, European Commission, European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade, 2023 (2023/C 23/01), available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2023_023_R_0001

[130] Regulation (EU) 2021/694 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Digital Europe Programme and repealing Decision (EU) 2015/2240, 29 April 2021, available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/694/oj

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raised by the COVID-19 pandemic or Russia's war in Ukraine: how important it is for Europe not to be dependent on systems and solutions coming from other regions of the world, how much are we vulnerable in our digital supply chains and how important is investing in cybersecurity and drastically improving EU's digital capacities, supporting projects in key capacity areas such as: supercomputing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, advanced digital skills, and ensuring a wide use of digital technologies across the economy and society. The program supports industry, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and public administration in their digital transformation with a reinforced network of European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH).

The programme is designed to bridge the gap between digital technology research and market deployment. It will benefit Europe's citizens and businesses, especially SMEs. Investment under the Digital Europe Programme supports the European Union's twin objectives of a green transition and digital transformation while strengthening the Union's resilience and digital sovereignty.

With an overall budget of over € 7.9 billion, DIGITAL aims to shape the digital transformation of Europe's society and economy, in line with EU's goals defined in the Communication - 2030 Digital Compass: The European way for the Digital Decade and in the Policy Programme - Path to the Digital Decade.

In particular, in the Digital Europe Work Programme 2023-2024, in the strand of activities related to Confidence in Digital Transformation of the chapter Accelerating the Best Use of Technologies, the Action includes the EU co-funded network of Safer Internet Centres (SICs) and the EU-funded portal betterinternetforkids.eu, the hub for child online safety, which are key for the implementation of BIK+ in the Member States and at European level.[131] The updated strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) supports large-scale media literacy campaigns, to reach children, families and teachers, harnessing existing national and European multipliers such as schools, civil society organisations, and industry.[132]

[131] ANNEX to the Commission Implementing Decision amending the Commission Implementing Decision C (2023) 1862 final on the financing of the Digital Europe Programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2023 - 2024, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/work-programmes-digital

[132] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE

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Safer Internet Centres (SICs) are established in most EU Member States to inform, advise, and assist children, parents, teachers, and carers on digital questions and online safety. They offer three main services:

- National Awareness Centres: Organise campaigns, develop information materials, and run information sessions to raise awareness of online safety;
- Helplines: Provide advice to young people, parents, and carers on harmful content, cyberbullying, grooming, and data privacy;
- Hotlines: Allow the public to report illegal content, such as child sexual abuse material, anonymously.

Safer Internet Centres are present in most of the Member States. They co-operate and exchange resources and best practices at EU level through the previously mentioned portal betterinternetforkids.eu.[133]

These actions collectively aim to create a safer, more trustworthy digital environment for all citizens.

The Digital Europe Programme does not address challenges in isolation. It complements the funding available through other EU programmes, such as the Horizon Europe (for research and innovation) and the Connecting Europe Facility (for digital infrastructure), the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Structural funds, to name a few. It is a part of the long-term EU budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027.

REGIONS, A Digital Decade for children and youth: the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2022:212:FIN

[133] European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Shaping Europe's digital future, Safer Internet Centres, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/safer-internet-centres

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Conclusion

The findings of this literature review underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the subject under investigation. Through an extensive examination of existing scholarship, this study has elucidated key theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence, and ongoing debates that shape the discourse. The reviewed literature provides a critical foundation for understanding the historical evolution, contemporary manifestations, and future trajectories of the issue at hand.

A major theme emerging from this review is the interplay between structural determinants and agency. Numerous studies highlight the influence of institutional frameworks, economic constraints, and socio-political dynamics in shaping the phenomenon under study. However, countervailing perspectives emphasize the role of individual and collective agency in navigating and challenging these structures. This dialectical tension remains a focal point for further inquiry.

Moreover, the review has identified significant gaps in the literature. While certain aspects have been rigorously analyzed, others remain underexplored, particularly in the context of evolving global and regional developments. Methodological limitations in existing studies also suggest the need for more robust, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive approaches. Future research should aim to address these gaps by integrating diverse methodological frameworks, expanding empirical datasets, and engaging with marginalized perspectives.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academic discourse. Policy recommendations drawn from the literature suggest that effective interventions require a nuanced understanding of the historical and structural forces at play. Policymakers and practitioners could consider adopting holistic strategies that incorporate both macro-level structural changes and micro-level community based initiatives to address the identified challenges.

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