



Media and Information Literacy - Policies and Practices

Introduction to the research report – Albania

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Limited aspects of media and information literacy tackled in Albania

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1. Introduction

Media and information literacy in Albania is a relatively new and unexplored concept in its formal sense, both in terms of public debate and in terms of policies discussed and applied to develop initiatives in this field. So far the official policies tackle only limited aspects of media and information literacy and the efforts to apply such policies have not always been consistent or successful. Civil society actors have pioneered more in this regard, even though these initiatives have not been long-term or particularly efficient either. The following sections provide an overview of the main existing initiatives in MIL from state, public, private bodies and civil society organizations, analyzing the main trends in the field of MIL, which determine also the focus of this research report.

1.2. Official policies related to Media and Information Literacy in Albania

The mentioning of media and information literacy in official documents, policies and strategies has two features that are common to almost all these documents: they refer mainly to information, rather than media literacy, and they address almost exclusively the need to build competencies in information literacy, while critical thinking of information and media content is neglected or missing altogether.

In this context, key documents that detail government policies on information society, such as the Digital Agenda Strategy (2015-2020)¹, and its predecessor the Inter-Sectoral Strategy of Information Society (2008-2013)² focus on the need to introduce ICT as a subject in schools. Overall, the priorities identified for the years 2015-2020 from the Digital Agenda Strategy include the overall improvement of national infrastructure of ICT, increasing high speed connection, (at least 100 Mbps for 50% of households and 30 Mbps for the population), increasing percentage of population using internet from 50% in 2013 to 90% at the end of 2020, and have broadband internet connection for all schools in the country. More specifically regarding ICT in education, the Action Plan of the Strategy states that some of the steps to be taken include digitalization of libraries in pre-university education institutions, training for teachers in ICT, developing e-learning system, and continuing work with ICT in pre-university education.

¹ Council of Ministers. 2015. *Cross-cutting Strategy 'Digital Agenda of Albania 2015-2020*. 2015. Available at: http://akshi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Digital_Agenda_Strategy_2015_-_2020.pdf.

² Council of Ministers. 2008. *Cross-cutting strategy on information society*. Available at: https://shtetiweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Information-Society-strategy_printed_version_en.pdf.

Official strategies in the above-mentioned documents briefly address the importance of educating the public on how to take advantage of information, but information is taken for granted as an opportunity, and is not viewed as a potential subject of criticism and scrutiny. It seems that the main focus of policies with regard to information literacy has been influenced especially by the ongoing digitalization of both public and private services. In this respect, official documents have tended to favor educating and instructing citizens on e-government and e-society in general, equipping them with the technical skills on how to obtain, use, and spread information regarding these services.

Critically judging other aspects that come with digitalization or the quality of information itself has not been part of the official policies or strategies drafted. This is a trend that pertains not only to digitalization and new media, but also to traditional media, in view of the lack of any policy on media literacy in both general regulation and media specific one.

1.2.1. ICT defines MIL policies in formal education

The basic legal framework for pre-university graduation in Albania is laid out in the Law no. 69 / 2012 "On pre-university education in the Republic of Albania."³ The main approach taken in legislation regarding education is that the pre-university education should use a competency-based approach, including among the competencies that students must acquire also digital competencies, which can be seen as related to MIL skills. Digital skills are later defined and then actualized in the curricula, but the main principle is similar to the official strategies in the area of information, namely that it is important to have students capable of finding or creating content, but having students that see and think critically about content does not seem to be a particular priority.

The same spirit is echoed in other important documents of formal education such as the Strategy of Development of Pre-University Education 2014-2020⁴ and the Curricula Framework and the Core Curricula. With regard to digital competencies, these documents put an important emphasis on technology and ICT, which are one of the main seven learning areas defined in pre-university education curricula. As a result, ICT is a mandatory course for both public and private pre-university schools in the country. Even though the teaching of this subject is not always problem-free and training of teachers can be improved, the curricula recognize the importance of having information digitally capable citizens.

The critical part or deconstruction of media and information structures and practices, on the other hand, is not part of official policies and priorities. However, small sections of certain subjects do address limited aspects of critical thinking on media content, such as text, advertising, access to information, etc. This section remains marginal compared to the weight of ICT, though, and there is no clear or important vision in the official policies on education regarding critical thinking on media and information.

³ Council of Ministers. 2012. "On pre-university education in the Republic of Albania," Law np.69/2012. Available at: <http://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Liqi-nr-69-21-06-2012.pdf>.

⁴ Ministry of Education. 2015. *Strategy of development of pre-university education 2014-2020*. Available at: http://www.arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Strategji_APU_dokumenti_perfundimtar_24_03_2015.pdf.

1.3. Civil society organizations: pioneering in media literacy

The main actors that have occasionally attempted to fill the void in media and information literacy come mainly from civil society actors. These initiatives are mainly short-term, limited in time and scope, and lacking a long-term policy and vision, which would also require cooperation with other actors. Nonetheless, despite their limitations, they constitute the main serious efforts in terms of educating citizens on media and information literacy that go beyond ICT.

So, as part of a 2010 project, the Albanian Media Institute took the initiative of collecting and exchanging experience with other countries in the region on media literacy initiatives and exploring potential ways of introducing them into the curricula. As a result, two textbooks were created, which could be adopted by the official curricula even in a pilot form, but this did not happen for various reasons.

Training for young people on digital literacy is perhaps one of the most common initiatives of civil society organizations. These initiatives are usually short term courses, while long periods of training similar to a diploma course are infrequent. Several organizations have engaged in such efforts, including Albanian Media Institute, Media Aktive center, etc. In addition, have also been initiatives of competitions that call on citizens to produce video or other media content on social issues, which is another form of media literacy. Recently, Fakteje.al was established. This is a fact-checking website, created as part of a bigger project on justice, which tackles the truthfulness of statements made by politicians, and the only such website dedicated to fact-checking of public statements in the country.

1.4. The dormant state of public media authorities and professional media bodies on media and information literacy

Overall, the efforts of NGOS in the field of media literacy have been limited, addressing a particular group, and lacking a long-term effect. The lack of involvement of media actors is also part of the problem in effective creation of media and information literacy initiatives. Regulatory and self-regulatory bodies that could address the aspect of educating citizens on media and raising awareness on the need to critically view media content are weak or do not have media literacy as their main priority. Council of Complaints, which is part of the regulator, the Audiovisual Media Authority, has organized a few meetings on this topic, but so far they have included only professionals of the field and have not yet spread to a larger part of the public.

The Council of Viewers and Listeners at the public broadcaster was recently established and it remains to be seen if it could have a role in this regard. Similarly, the Council of Ethics, which is an organization established by media professionals with the aim of improving media ethics, has also a limited scope of work and does not have a long experience, even though in theory it can play a role in furthering any media and information literacy.

In general media have not shown any interest in educating citizens on media and information literacy, especially in the need for media scrutiny in a democratic society. The only positive effort in this regard is the introduction of a weekly 30-minute section in the daily morning show of the public broadcaster as an interview with a journalism professor, focusing on discussing media conduct and criticizing media content, addressing topics such as social media, privacy, distinguishing between facts and opinions, etc.

1.5. Private companies and MIL: a further boost to ICT skills

Efforts of the private sector, such as IT companies, in the field of media and information literacy have also been rare. The Microsoft has sponsored a project of massive open online course (MOOC) on coding practices and other ICT aspects, at the time, in 2016, a pilot project in cooperation with the then-Ministry of Innovation, and the platform is still accessible online. The subjects offered in online classes and tutorials include English, Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry as general subjects, as well as Coding and ICT as professional subjects. Recently the ICTS lab was opened as part of the ICT Academy, aiming to teach ICT skills to children from 7-19 years old⁵.

Again, overall efforts of the private industry in the field of MIL focus almost exclusively on ICT, while critical thinking on media and its conduct, on fake news and propaganda, although a constant part of public statements, are not addressed seriously or consistently, or at all for that matter.

1.6. Protecting versus educating

The concept of educating citizens on the way media system works is relatively unexplored in Albania, apart from occasional public discussions initiated by media in extreme cases, usually involving debates on violation of ethics. Otherwise, there is almost no effort to encourage critical thinking on media and initiatives that serve to guide citizens in their media consumption, providing them with the necessary tools, information, and keys on how to read and use media.

More often than not, in fact, guidance of citizens on media consists in protecting citizens from the media, rather than teaching them on how the media works. This trend is especially visible in the efforts of NGOs and public agencies focused on child protection. In fact, the initiatives aiming to offer a safer online environment for children are far more advanced than any initiative involving components of critical thinking of media and information literacy. Due also to the high need and sensitivity to offer protection to minors, state actors, international organizations, and domestic actors have been more vocal and more active in addressing this issue. This is reflected in the existing legislation, in specific guidelines set by official authorities on child safety online and on privacy issues, as well as the more visible efforts and activities held by youth and child organizations in this respect.

Currently there is a coalition of several actors and organizations, including state and intra-state bodies, international organizations like UN bodies, and local organizations focusing on child protection online, which have their own platform and website: www.isigurt.al. Similarly to other activities carried out by these organizations, the main concern is protecting children, rather than explaining them how to use the media and information safely, but effectively. Recently the National Safe Internet Centre opened in Albania, aiming to increase internet safety, especially for children and youth.⁶

⁵ Gerta Dervishi. 2018. "Tirana's new innovation center ICTSlab prepares Albanian youngsters for 21st century challenges." *Follow Business Albania*, 5 September 2018. Available at: <https://followbusinessalbania.com/tiranas-new-innovation-center-ictslab-prepares-albanian-youngsters-for-21-st-century-challenges/>

⁶ Children Rights Center Albania. 2018. "National Safe Internet Centre opened in Albania." *CRCA*, 31 October 2018. Available at: <http://www.crca.al/en/news/national-safe-internet-centre-opened-albania>.

1.7. Thematic focus of the country research: Boosting the role of public institutions in educating citizens on MIL

After this brief overview of the media and information literacy efforts in the country, it can be said that efforts to address this field are still rare, lack a cohesive effort and vision, and are sporadic, rather than ongoing projects. Official policy visibly favors ICT, while media and information critical thinking is not seen as a priority in education. Efforts of civil society to fill this void have not been particularly successful. Even though ongoing, they have been fragmented, and concerning limited number of players, rather than a concerted effort of players that would ensure a greater success of such initiatives. Finally, the public debate and existing efforts visibly favor protectionist tendencies towards media and information, rather than efforts that educate and nurture, instead of prohibiting, and child safety rather than child education and awareness.

Against this background, the research report in the next chapters will focus on exploring the role of media-related public bodies in MIL: universities, public broadcaster, regulator, self-regulatory mechanisms, seeking to determine which are the factors that affect the current role and impact of public institutions in promoting MIL among the population. Public institutions focusing on media are considered as potentially among the most powerful in starting MIL initiatives, but so far they have kept a very low profile. The regulator has made a few attempts through Council of Complaints, but the initiative is still in closed and sporadic discussions.

The public broadcaster has devoted limited air time recently to discussions related to MIL, but it does not have any specific policy or initiative in this regard. Even though it has recently established a Council of Viewers and Listeners, there are not steps to make it a public initiative that would assist to a better knowledge and communication of the citizens with public broadcaster. The public university is also limited to its curricula and has not further engaged to raise awareness on MIL needs or develop relevant tools that would promote media and information literacy among the population. The National Library has a more established tradition of organizing awareness seminars with students on retrieving and using information, but these efforts are also limited and pertain mostly to the library science.