

# Media and Information Literacy - Policies and Practices

Introduction to the research report – Serbia

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# Experiences and new opportunities for implementing MIL in primary and secondary schools in Serbia

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## 1. Awareness of the need for Media Literacy still has no general prevalence

*“Teachers have to change their concept of work entirely. They should not be frightened by the fact that their pupils sometimes know more than they do, which is often the case nowadays.”*

*“Simply, a teacher no longer carries information but only needs to teach students how to learn.”*

(teachers, participants of the focus groups)

The process of raising the degree of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) among citizens of Serbia is currently taking place on several levels, primarily through project activities of NGOs. Most of the actions that have MIL in focus recognize young population as the target group. Putting an emphasis on educating the youth is even more meaningful considering that one of the key points of MIL is the ability to critically analyze media content knowing that the best time to form critical minds is in an early stage of life. Since there is still no systematically solved issue of adequate education in the field of understanding the way of functioning of the media as well as understanding the messages sent to us through the media, every NGO initiative and activity is welcomed.

However, the dispersion of actions of the NGO sector, which remain without a united focus, is the result of relative constraints put to project activities further affecting the lack of general prevalence of the awareness of the need for media literacy. After considering a wide spectrum of activities, the following conclusions were made:

- It is necessary to carry out raising awareness media campaign about the importance of raising the level of MIL among citizens of Serbia;
- Despite some progress in the field of official education, advocacy for the systematic introduction of MIL into primary and secondary education system should continue;
- It is necessary to put an emphasis on adequate education in the field of MIL for educational workers.

## 1.1. Research on Media and Information Literacy

In the last several years, many studies have been done on the level of MIL of citizens of Serbia.<sup>1</sup> These studies have approached the MIL problem in several different ways, thus yielding more comprehensive results that can serve as a starting point in further resolving of the issue of media literacy of the population.

The studies covered the following four fields:

- Communication needs of students and teachers;
- Ways in which MIL educational program should be implemented in Serbian schools;
- The current level of MIL among the citizens of Serbia;
- The level of awareness of the need for raising the level of media literacy.

Main conclusions of the studies imply that there is a simulacrum of media literacy in Serbia and that it is necessary to raise the level of media literacy of the entire population of Serbia. One of the main recommendations is that the media should take an active role in the process of implementing MIL in the educational system.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the communication needs of children, it is noticeable that their interests slowly shift to the virtual sphere, and that they are much more interested in solving problems and challenges if they are in the digital sphere. Most teachers note that generally educational materials and didactic means are obsolete and that a systemic reform is necessary to implement MIL in education in an adequate manner. Also, students notice that media content is not sufficiently discussed in schools, despite their need for it.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2. State initiatives

In the last several years, the state administration has created important documents which recognize the importance of the educational reform in Serbia including the importance of MIL. Reforms have been taking place since the school year 2018/2019. MIL is mentioned in the Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System and in the *Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020*. In these documents, raising the level of MIL among children is set as one of the goals that should be accomplished by transforming libraries in media libraries, which would provide opportunities for acquiring new knowledge in the field of media.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Studies were conducted by the Faculty of Philosophy Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy Nis, Mediacycenter Nis and BIRODI.

<sup>2</sup> Stamenkovic, S. 2013. *Media Literacy in Serbia*, Belgrade: Bureau for social research. Available at: <http://www.birodi.rs/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Medijaska-pismenost-u-Srbiji-rezultati-istra%C5%BEivanja.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> ValicNedeljkovic, Bala, Geler. 2016. *Children on communication*. In: Languages and Cultures in time and space 6. Novi Sad: Faculty of Philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Before defining the Strategy, the project of Library Plus NGO - Internest was already realized. The focus of this project was to transform libraries into media libraries, which should help to express creativity by presenting school material in a different - media format. See more on: <http://www.bibliotekaplus.rs/>.

The Ministry of Culture and Information convened a national consultation in mid-2018 to bring together all actors dealing with media literacy in Serbia, with the ultimate goal of identifying good practice models that would be an integral part of the strategy for the systematic introduction of media literacy into primary and secondary schools. The next step in the activities of the ministry is to establish a working group for the preparation of MIP curricula. The establishment of a working group is expected in October 2018.

Since the school year 2018/2019, education reforms have introduced the elective course *Language, media and culture* that students can choose in the first year of the grammar school<sup>5</sup>. The goal of learning the Language, media and culture program is to contribute to the improvement of communication skills, the development of media culture and the adoption of cultural patterns that will enable the student to navigate in the modern world, build identity and develop professionally. The total number of classes during the school year is 37.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3. Initiatives of civil sector

NGOs of various provenances deal with MIL in several ways, by organizing:

- Seminars of professional development for teachers,<sup>7</sup>
- Workshops, camps, and festivals for students,<sup>8</sup>
- Courses for secondary school and faculty students,<sup>9</sup>
- Media production.<sup>10</sup>

The actions of the civil sector are mostly focused on alternative educational activities. It is noticeable that every organization has a different approach to the implementation of their actions. These forms of non-formal education can serve as a model when forming a MIL plan of formal education at all levels. In addition to the programs itself, the work of the non-governmental sector is also significant due to the pool of MIP experts. What is lacking in the MIL initiatives in Serbia is networking that would allow easy insight into and review of activities, as well as exchange of experiences. The assumption is that the formation of a coalition of experts would provide better quality work in raising media literacy level of the population. Since state initiatives have been initiated to introduce MIP into education systems, the advisory role of the civil sector could be a factor unifying the experts on a common task. NGOs could retain their role as educators in the field of non-formal education even after the formal introduction of MIL into the education system since it is a field that changes daily, depending on the direction of information technology development and social trends. The flexibility of project activities could be a good complement to formal education at all levels of education.

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<sup>5</sup> There are currently 133 grammar schools in Serbia, however, the elective character of the subject prevents us from predicting the exact number of students who will attend these classes this school year (2018/2019).

<sup>6</sup> In order to see what the benefits are, and what the subject is missing, it would be good to do a cross-section of the situation after the first semester.

<sup>7</sup> Novi Sad School of Journalism, Library Plus.

<sup>8</sup> Novi Sad School of Journalism, Library Plus, ASMEDI.

<sup>9</sup> Social Margin Center.

<sup>10</sup> TV series *In the Network* created by Share Foundation is an example of quality production – both technically and by its content. As studies have shown, young people still spend a lot of time watching television, therefore this segment of the media should not be disregarded when implementing the MIL on a wide scale. See more on: <https://www.umrezi.rs/>.

#### **1.4. Thematic focus of the country research: Teachers' and students' experiences and expectations regarding MIL**

As one of the most experienced non-governmental organizations in Serbia in the field of MIL, the Novi Sad School of Journalism (NSSJ) has focused its activities at introducing the practice of media and information literacy in the existing systems of primary and secondary education as a form of functional literacy of citizens in the democratic society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The experience of lecturers and teachers attending MIL seminars organized by NSSJ shows the necessity for systematic work with teachers, as well as for raising awareness about the necessity of training in this field. Therefore, the focus of the country research has been examining teachers' and students' experiences and expectations regarding MIL in primary and secondary schools in Serbia. In the next chapters of the research report the findings of the five focus group discussions with teachers and students will be presented.

During August 2018, the focus groups were organized with 52 teachers and students from elementary and secondary schools from 11 cities of Serbia. In addition to that, the report refers to the online questionnaire on media habits of young people: 211 students from 18 cities and villages from Serbia filled the questionnaire during September 2018.