Promoting media and information literacy in libraries

Huysmans, F.

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RESEARCH FOR CULT COMMITTEE - PROMOTING MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN LIBRARIES

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Abstract

Librarians and (public) libraries are active in promoting information literacy and (more recently) media literacy. After a brief historical sketch, this document describes how public libraries assist patrons and educational institutions in enhancing knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to critically engage with media and information. It sketches international organizations' endeavours to put media and information literacy (MIL) on the policy agenda, describes what is (not yet) known about the effectiveness of MIL programs, and offers recommendations for EU and public library policy.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The concepts of media literacy and information literacy were developed in the 1960s-70s at a time when the growing importance of mass media and information in everyday life started to make educators wonder if basic literacy skills (reading and writing) would suffice for youngsters to assess themselves later in life. Librarians and library researchers were playing a crucial part in developing programs to enhance information literacy, and only later became involved in media literacy promotion when concerns rose in the 1990s and beginning 2000s over 'digital divides' between those with the resources and skills to use digital media for their own personal and professional development and those without.

There is a wide diversity in concepts/definitions of media literacy and information literacy among scholars and educators. An influential definition of *information literacy* states that it is the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate and effectively use the needed information (American Library Association 1989). *Media literacy* has recently been defined as all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with both traditional and new forms of media (Council of the European Union 2016).

Public libraries are gradually transforming into all-round media and information-rich learning environments, while reading and borrowing books remains important for supporting literacy in the original sense: 'reading and writing literacy'. By introducing media labs and so-called makerspaces, and organizing/hosting hackathons, they try to strike a balance between a defensive, protectionist stance to media literacy (protect children from harm, prevent elderly from becoming isolated) and an offensive, empowering one (assist people in improving their faculties and support their creative talents). A gradual change in perspective can be observed on the role of the public library in the community, from uniquely offering access to information toward a philosophy and culture of sharing of information and knowledge.

Since the turn of the millennium, the European Commission and the OECD have signalled the importance of information and knowledge for the employed and citizens in general, for the economy and for society as a whole. Organizations like UNESCO and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and institutions) have stressed the importance of media and information literacy for the social and cultural development of individuals, communities and societies. UNESCO and IFLA have introduced a unitary framework for 'media and information literacy' (MIL) and are working together to support librarians in working out practical programmes aimed at furthering MIL development of their patrons.

As yet, the scarcely available research does not allow the conclusion that media and information literacy programmes in public libraries can generally be called effective; more systematic research is needed. A wealth of studies in information behaviour provides insights into the way people are dealing with information. Research into the effectiveness of media education in general (mainly outside of public libraries) is mixed. However, many practitioners and researchers find that media literacy programs can successfully change attitudes and, sometimes, behaviours, which is supported by a recent meta-analysis of 51 quantitative studies. The *Global Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework* developed by UNESCO, a combination of assessment tools, methodology and guidelines for data collection for the assessment of media and information literacy, might prove useful in helping public libraries demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs in a systematic manner. Children, youth, adults and elderly people of all social backgrounds will be better equipped to face the challenges - and grasp the opportunities - of living in a society saturated with information and media.

In order for this to become a reality, the following recommendations are put forward:

- In the Education and Training 2020 Framework, recognize the full potential of libraries, particularly public and school libraries, in supporting formal, non-formal and informal learning in all aspects of literacy: reading and writing, information literacy and media literacy.

- Public libraries have suffered severe budget cuts in several EU Member States in recent years, forcing them to cut down on qualified personnel (particularly younger librarians) and opening hours, and even to close library branches. In order to realize their full potential in increasing media and information literacy, it is crucial that public libraries be supported, both in a political and economic sense, to transform themselves into community learning centres with extended opening hours and a professional staff that mirrors the community's demographic composition.

- Continue to work, in collaboration with other international organizations and with library organizations, towards a unified conceptual framework of media and information literacy, including 'digital literacy/ICT skills', geared at developing knowledge, critical awareness, competencies (passive/receptive and active/creative) in handling today's ubiquitous media and information landscape to one's own advantage.

- Work towards a research program, preferably within Horizon 2020, aimed at discovering strengths and weaknesses in current media and information literacy programs, in order to enhance the effectiveness of such programs. If possible, use UNESCO's Assessment Framework in evaluation studies.

1. MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY: WHAT IS IT?

A very brief history
Media literacy as a concept was coined for the first time in the 1960s. Teachers and pedagogues, observing the growing importance of mass media like radio and television in everyday life, started to doubt whether being 'literate' - being able to read and write - alone would be sufficient for persons, and children in particular, to assert themselves in modern society. Being literate, according to media educators, should encompass not only being able to decode and produce textual information but also to critically engage with various media technologies, genres and formats. Academic study and analysis of (the production of) feature films, radio, music and television had demonstrated all kinds of manifest and latent structures in the production and use of mass-mediated messages, as well as in these messages themselves. Being media literate meant being able to see through the daily flood of messages, see the 'big picture' - and become a more critical media user, also vis-à-vis potentially harmful content (e.g., violent and sexually explicit messages), political propaganda and advertising.

In the same vein and at around the same time, the expanding information environment called for the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff: to locate relevant sources and, in a next step, to distinguish between reliable and questionable information and information sources. In earlier times, broadening access had led to the establishment of public information institutions, like (from the 18th century onwards) museums, (public) libraries and archives, as well as public broadcasting systems in the 20th century. With the rapid expansion of information production in the 20th century, offering access to information as a public service was accompanied by curating - assembling an appropriate collection of sources around a wide array of themes - and a pedagogical aim: to help learners become their own information curators. In making pre-publication filters look like things from the past, the World Wide Web only amplified the need for citizens to be information literate.

Definitions
Looking through academic, professional and policy documents, it is clear that there is no one 'leading' definition media literacy nor of information literacy. Depending on the academic or professional discipline and the educational, cultural and societal contexts in which scholars work, different aspects of media and information literacy are put in the foreground. As Potter (2013: 217) states: "The body of literature about media literacy is a large complex patchwork of ideas that displays considerable variety in the way it is defined". The same is true for information literacy (Bawden & Robinson 2012: 288-289). To give at least an impression of what is generally understood under both terms, two relatively early definitions are provided that have proven to be influential in the international, including the European, discussion.

Aufderheide (1993), in a report on a U.S. 'National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy', described a *media literate* person as someone who *"can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is critical autonomy in relationship to all media. Emphases in media literacy training range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence. The range of emphases will expand with the growth of media literacy."* Central to media education is the notion that media and mediated messages are reflecting manifest and latent social values, and that they also help shape social reality.

The American Library Association (1989) defined an *information literate* person as *"able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. (...) Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand."*

Media literacy versus information literacy
Although media literacy and information literacy share some common ground, they are conceptually different, coming from separate academic and practical traditions (Lee & So 2014; cf. Livingstone et al. 2005). In information literacy, 'information' has traditionally been conceived as more or less factual, neutral and pure 'content', regardless of the form in which it has been cast. Media literacy, on the other hand, tends to problematize the reciprocal influences of content and form. Content determines to a certain extent the form in which it will be cast and, conversely, the form influences the content that will be offered (cf. Aufderheide 1993: 2).

Since the advent of the World Wide Web with its underlying 'hyperlinked' structure, form aspects have entered the information literacy discussion as well, leading to the concept of 'digital literacy' (Bawden 2001; Bawden & Robinson 2008; ELINET 2016). Other 'literacies' like 'ICT literacy', as well as digital skills, ICT skills and the '21st century skills' which have become prominent in recent years) are not discussed here (but see Bawden 2001; Koltay 2011).

In recently published conclusions of the Council of the European Union on 'Developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training', media literacy is defined as *"all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with both traditional and new forms of media."* In a footnote, it is clarified that *"[t]hese capacities allow us to exercise critical thinking, while participating in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process. The concept covers different media: broadcasting, video, radio, press, through various channels: traditional, internet, social media and addresses the needs of all ages"* (Council of the European Union 2016).

This definition reflects the broadening of scope of the positive effects on civic and democratic participation that are expected from media education. As will be outlined below, public and other types of libraries are well positioned to contribute to media literacy enhancement, more specifically to information (and digital) literacy. In the remainder of this document, an impression is given of the activities public libraries undertake, and what is known about their effectiveness.

2. PUBLIC LIBRARIES' ROLE IN MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

From information to media literacy

Traditionally, together with school and academic and research libraries, public libraries have been at the forefront of promoting information literacy, only later widening it to media literacy. Especially in schools in primary, secondary and tertiary education, libraries saw (and still see) their added value to the learning process in assisting and instructing learners in finding and evaluating mostly textual sources, in their own collections, in licensed databases and on the web.

When in the 1990s and 2000s digital media gradually became central to the workplace, to school and to the home, public libraries were an obvious place to provide Internet access and instruction for those lacking the resources and skills to become connected. Partly through their efforts and because fixed and mobile Internet access has become more common, fears of a persistent 'access gap' have diminished. Social groups lagging behind in access have caught up or are beginning to do so. However, concerns about a 'skills and use gap' between frontrunners and disadvantaged groups continue to exist, which is why public libraries run instruction programs for those lagging behind.

As far as media literacy in a broader, not exclusively 'digital' sense is concerned, activities of libraries and schools aim at guiding students to enhance safety in their online behaviour, on the web and in social media. Also, (teacher-)librarians and instructors in citizenship education run courses in making teens more aware of commercial and political interest behind mediated messages on and off the web.

From protection to empowerment

All in all, there is a focus on kids and youth - and their parents - on the one hand, and on acquiring digital skills on the other, in public library efforts to enhance media and information literacy. The adult population, especially low-literate and elderly citizens, is assisted in acquiring digital skills (world wide web, e-mail, social media). Set against the Council's definition above, it is clear that as yet, most public libraries focus on what they can do best (information literacy, including digital literacy) for the persons who need it most. Yet, a group of frontrunner libraries see it as their task to enhance their patrons' media literacy in a broader sense:

- Offering *media labs*, spaces in the library where patrons learn to use hard- and software for their own good (e.g., edit video and sound recordings into a presentation of their voluntary organization or one-person-company);
- Furnish *makerspaces/hackerspaces/FabLabs*: "creative, DIY (do-it-yourself) spaces where people can gather to create, invent and learn. In libraries, they often have 3D printers, software, electronics, craft and hardware supplies and tools, and more" (Willingham & de Boer 2015: 1);
- Organizing and/or hosting *hackathons*: community events where software developers, graphic designers, gamers and others gather to create new software and hardware applications, sometimes to improve digital library functionalities themselves.

With such spaces and activities, these libraries aim to show their commitment to be an all-round media and information-rich learning environment, not merely a place where people can come to read and borrow books (although that aspects remains important, if only to also support 'reading and writing literacy'). It also means achieving a better balance between a defensive, protectionist stance to media literacy (protect children from harm, prevent elderly from becoming isolated) and an offensive, empowering one (assist people in improving their faculties and support their creative talents) (cf. Hobbs 2011). Moreover, it implies a change in perspective on the role of the public library in the community, from uniquely offering access to information toward a more democratic philosophy and culture of sharing of information and knowledge. The sharing can take place between libraries and their users, and - maybe more importantly - between users who want to share their knowledge and others who want to learn.

3. POLICY APPROACHES TO MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

As already mentioned, information literacy is a central concept in many strands of librarianship, ranging from public and school libraries to academic and research libraries. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that libraries and their professional organizations have tried to formalize their approach to it in policy documents. A comprehensive overview of both professional and academic work, as well as policy approaches from national, European and global governmental bodies signalizes that Europe stepped in rather late in international comparison. Yet after this cold start, governments and libraries in Europe have caught up (Virkus 2003, 2013; cf. Borg & Lauri 2011).

The European Commission, in its lifelong learning policy, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), signalled the importance of information and knowledge for the employed and citizens in general, for the economy and society as a whole around the turn of the millennium. Recently, ELINET (European Literacy Policy Network) has advocated a broad understanding of digital literacy (including, but not confined to ICT skills alone; ELINET 2016). Yet policy discourse was framed mostly in economic and technological terms, stressing the economic growth potential of a healthy IT sector in Europe, almost ignoring information literacy in a social and cultural sense. Through organizations and networks like the International Federation of Library Associations and institutions (IFLA), ELINET and the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), this has changed somewhat in the last decade. UNESCO introduced the Information for All Programme (IFAP) in 2000, which is still continuing. Since 2012, the International Federation of Library Associations and institutions (IFLA) and UNESCO have been collaborating on Media & Information Literacy (MIL). The two organizations are taking the two concepts together, which might have the effect of the broadening of the traditional scope of libraries on information literacy.

"MIL is defined as a combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills and practices required to access, analyse, evaluate, use, produce and communicate information and knowledge in creative, legal and ethical ways that respect human rights. Media and information-literate individuals can use diverse media, information sources and channels in their private, professional and public lives. They know when and what information they need and what for, and where and how to obtain it. They understand who has created that information and why, as well as the roles, responsibilities and functions of media, information providers and memory institutions. They can analyse information, messages, beliefs and values conveyed through the media and any kind of content producers, and can validate information they have found and produced against a range of generic, personal and context-based criteria. MIL competencies thus extend beyond information and communication technologies to encompass learning, critical thinking and interpretive skills across and beyond professional, educational and societal boundaries. MIL addresses all types of media (oral, print, analogue and digital) and all forms and formats of resources."
- Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy, 28 June 2012 (UNESCO 2014: 94; cf. IFLA 2011).

Through IFLA's activities and its sections (notably those on Information Literacy, Public Libraries, School Libraries, and Academic & Research Libraries), notions like those in the Moscow Declaration are disseminated to the national level. Naturally they do not give guidance to the practice of media and information literacy instruction on the library floor. It is left to the professionalism of librarians to work out practical programs that should yield the desired effects, supported by their (inter)national professional organizations (like the International Association of School Librarianship, see IASL 2016). In the next section, some indication is given of what is known about the effectiveness of media and information literacy efforts.

4. EFFECTIVENESS OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY PROMOTION THROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Information literacy as information behavior

In view of the stronger focus in libraries on information than on media literacy, it is only natural that research into libraries' effectiveness has been directed more towards the former. However, the library profession and its academic counterpart, the library and information science (LIS) discipline, haven't devoted much time and money on the evaluation of concrete programs per se. Rather, attention has been devoted to the broader study of information behaviour: how persons interact with information. Information seeking and information problem solving research aims to understand the process of information behaviour rather than information gains directly attributable to library programs. Also, studies tend to measure information literacy in terms of self-efficacy - how well individuals think they are performing - rather than measuring their performance in formal test settings (cf. Case 2012; Kuhlthau 2004).

Effectiveness of media education on media literacy

As for research on the effectiveness of media education in general - not necessarily connected to libraries - it can be said that the evidence is not solid. As one observer states: "The research is weak and mixed, leaving the question of media literacy's efficacy very much up in the air. (...) Nevertheless, there is room for optimism. Many practitioners and researchers find that media literacy programs can successfully change attitudes and, sometimes, behaviors" (McCannon 2009: 527; see also Martens 2010).

A longitudinal study into the influence of media socialization of children by their parents shows that parental socialization in reading, TV and digital media use can have a lasting effect on the children's cognitive and cultural development. That influence can be both positive and negative, depending on the kind of media socialization that is offered (Notten 2011).

A meta-analysis of 51 quantitative studies into media literacy interventions mostly conducted in schools showed a positive effect of these interventions. Programmes for media literacy that are spread out over a larger number of sessions appear to increase participants' competences. Programmes that spread their efforts over too many components, thereby possibly causing information overload or confusion, were less successful. Positive effects were observed across diverse agents (teachers, peers, researchers, others), target age groups, settings (schools, communities, other), topics (e.g., advertising, alcohol/tobacco/drugs), and countries (Jeong et al. 2012).

Effectiveness of media literacy interventions in libraries

As yet, not much is known about the effectiveness of media literacy programs in (public) libraries. This state of affairs need not surprise nor be of concern; it might just derive from the fact that media literacy has not been on the library's agenda for long. This is not to say that library interventions are not evaluated; they are, but mostly on a local level, leaving generalizing conclusions up in the air. What makes it hard to report on these evaluations is that they typically do not end up in the research literature nor are they documented in a sufficiently sound manner.

For possible effectiveness one is forced to rely on general media literacy studies not covering libraries. There seems to be reason for optimism, in view of the findings above, about what could be found once research will systematically target libraries' media and information literacy's interventions. The development and dissemination of the *Global Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework* (UNESCO 2013) might prove useful in this respect. It is a combination of assessment tools, methodology and guidelines for data collection for the assessment of media and information literacy. As such, it offers a unitary conceptual and measurement framework. Provided that enough evaluation studies in libraries will take it as a guideline for data collection and analysis, it will not only enable assessment of the level of media and information literacy (MIL) of patrons, librarians and libraries, but also comparison of MIL levels over time, e.g. before and after a course. As such, it might bring about a professionalization of policy and practice of MIL education and training in public libraries, in schools, in other forms of education and instruction (e.g., self-education with web resources) - opening public libraries' full potential as the open learning environments promoting social inclusion, as the Council of the European Union (2015: 9) sees them.

5. CONCLUSION: WHAT MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY TRAINING THROUGH LIBRARIES CAN BRING EUROPE

Public libraries, as did other library types, have traditionally focused their attention on enhancing their patrons' information literacy, besides general literacy (language acquisition, reading and writing skills). Starting around the turn of the millennium, their scope has been widened to include digital literacy and media literacy. The latter is not exclusively a library domain, as schools and (especially) parents play a major role here. Because of their being located in the centre of communities, they are well-positioned to support parents and schools in their socialization and education efforts.

In 2011-2012, IFLA and UNESCO joined forces in the media and information literacy (MIL) domain. By tying the hitherto separately evolved media literacy and information literacy concepts and practices together, they have laid the foundation for public libraries and their partner organizations to work towards more concerted efforts to support citizens of all ages in acquiring the knowledge, skills, attitudes and ethical stance to become more media and information literate. In so doing, children, youth, adults and elderly people of all social backgrounds will be better equipped to face the challenges - and grasp the opportunities - of living in a society saturated with information and media.

In order for this promising future to become a reality, the following recommendations might be observed:

- In the Education and Training 2020 Framework, recognize the potential of libraries, particularly public and school libraries, in supporting formal, non-formal and informal learning in all aspects of literacy: reading and writing, information literacy and media literacy.

- Public libraries have suffered severe budget cuts in several member states in recent years, forcing them to cut down on qualified personnel (particularly younger librarians) and opening hours, and even to close library branches. In order to realize their full potential in increasing media and information literacy, it is crucial that public libraries be supported, both in a political and economic sense, to transform themselves into community learning centres with extended opening hours and a professional staff that mirrors the community's demographic composition.

- Continue to work, in collaboration with other international organizations and with library organizations, towards a unified conceptual framework of media and information literacy, including 'digital literacy/ICT skills', geared at developing knowledge, critical awareness, competencies (passive/receptive and active/creative) in handling today's ubiquitous media and information landscape to one's own advantage.

- Work towards a research program, preferably within Horizon 2020, aimed at discovering strengths and weaknesses in current media and information literacy programs, in order to enhance the effectiveness of such programs. If possible, use UNESCO's Assessment Framework in evaluation studies.

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