

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S MEDIA LITERACY: RESEARCH AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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## ABSTRACT

The number of risks that young people may face when using the Internet and other information channels is increasing every year. Disinformation, data fraud, information bubble as an effect of social media algorithms, and negative impact on mental health are some reasons why media literacy education has become particularly relevant in recent years. Also, in Latvia, starting from the 2020/2021 school year, a new standard of education has been introduced.

The article aims to provide insight into two issues interrelated with young people's media literacy – its research in Latvia and its possibilities to improve how media literacy is included in the formal education system. The study consists of the analysis of the documents – the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, which determine the educational standards in the stages of basic and secondary education, as well as the analysis of media literacy studies conducted among young people in Latvia and published over the last five years.

Studies on media literacy among young people in Latvia have some gaps which determine that currently, it is more difficult to predict young people's exact and current needs in terms of media literacy. Although media literacy is represented in the newest educational standard for basic and secondary education, the main concern is the actual implementation of this standard in work with students, as there is still a lack of official supporting methodological materials and regular and systematic teacher education (including life-long education) in media literacy in Latvia.

An article could be helpful for education policy and media policy planners, practitioners, researchers, and organizations/institutions working in the media literacy field.

**Keywords:** *youth, young people, media literacy, formal education, curriculum, research, teachers*

## Introduction

Some information environment risks are related to the fact that accessing content and using various applications has become almost intuitive, it does not require much knowledge, such as consuming content on Youtube or

TikTok, but the problem is that although the use is intuitive, evaluating content is not – it requires specific knowledge of the media environment, manipulation of information to recognize such attempts, assess the purpose of the published content and other factors. The information environment itself is not geared towards promoting ethical use, given that the algorithmic performance of the social media platforms works on profit-making (rather than advancing the most reliable content). Cyberbullying and the psychological effects of social media use on self-esteem, and mental health, misinformation and disinformation, potential risk of data fraud, and other topics and threats to internet users are not the only reasons why media literacy education should receive special attention.

In the USA, the report found that “between 2019 and 2021, the total amount of screen media used each day went from 4:44 to 5:33 among tweens and from 7:22 to 8:39 among teens. This is a much faster increase in just two years than was seen in the previous four years.” (Common Sense Media, 2021). Namely, tweens are children between the ages of 8 and 12, and the next age group is 13–18. The amount of time in hours and minutes indicates that a significant part of young people's day is being spent in a digital environment using content for which we cannot be sure of its reliability and quality, as well as participating in the creation of the content themselves.

The last decade has also shifted what is considered trusted among young people. The results of a 2016 survey show that 40% of young Youtube users in the United States believe that their favorite Youtube content creator understands them better than their real-life friends (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016). Without going into the reasons for such results, the impact of digital content creators on young people's audiences is clear. Still, some studies suggest that trust in content created by influencers or internet celebrities may harm health. For example, in 2020, a team of researchers from the University of Glasgow and the University of Liverpool analyzed the activities of nine bloggers in the United Kingdom in a pilot study and found that eight out of nine bloggers offer recommendations on fitness and nutrition that were misleading and not based on scientific advice (Sabbagh et al., 2020).

A survey of 14–18-year-olds in Spain shows that young people tend to share content related to their interests on WhatsApp, regardless of its veracity. However, the encouraging part of the results reveals that an important factor is the value of information (newsworthiness) and its importance to society – the desire to gain popularity or entertainment purposes is a less important reason why young people share information via messaging apps. However, sometimes behind the intention to supposedly “inform others,” other motives can also be hidden, for example, to express one's belonging and search for identity (Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jiménez & Reyes de Cózar, 2020).

These are just a few examples of changes in the media landscape and its use among young people. As media use patterns change, the education system tries to adapt and provide training to critically evaluate information and other media literacy sub-skills and knowledge on media. However, the adjustment process is not quick and easy. Latvia has transitioned to so-called competence education, starting from the school year 2020/2021. However, there are still several problems at the system level with the inclusion of media literacy in the curriculum, both in education standard documents and in its practical implementation in the classroom with students. Therefore, the article addresses the issue of youth media literacy in the context of its research in Latvia (research results and methodological shortcomings) and opportunities to improve the development of media literacy through formal education.

The article aims to provide insight into two issues interrelated with young people's media literacy – its research in Latvia and its possibilities to improve how media literacy is included in the formal education system. To this end, three research questions have been raised:

1. What are the characteristics of youth media literacy research conducted in Latvia?
2. Do they provide comprehensive answers about youth media literacy that could be used to develop and improve educational content to adapt it to the real needs of young people?
3. How is media literacy included in Latvia's latest educational standard documents?

In this article, the term “young person” is used in the sense of the Youth Law of the Republic of Latvia to denote a person aged 13 to 25 (Saeima, 2008). Most of them are young people who have been acquiring education for at least some time, for instance, basic education is compulsory in Latvia (Saeima, 1998).

The article is based on the analysis of the documents – the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, which determine the educational standards in the stages of basic and secondary education, as well as the analysis of media literacy studies conducted among young people in Latvia and published over the last five years.

In the beginning, the article briefly explains the media literacy concept, followed by an analytical overview of the media literacy research conducted in Latvia and the possibility of using the results in developing educational content. The section on media literacy in the curriculum and the risks associated with its practical implementation in the classroom is followed by a summary of the main findings and recommendations for improving media literacy research for young people and integrating media literacy more fully into the curriculum.

## The concept of media literacy

Before looking at the development of media literacy as an element of the educational content of Latvia, it is essential to outline the concept of this term in general. Although the explanation of media literacy is pretty broad and with slightly different interpretations in various sources, the main emphasis is on the ability to access media content and other information, evaluate it independently of the format and channel and create media content themselves.

In the early 1990s, media literacy was interpreted as the ability of citizens to access, analyze and create information for a specific purpose (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993). Later, the understanding of media literacy expanded to include a broader understanding of the context of the era and its implications for the media (and vice versa – assessing the impact of the media on society, for example, in shaping societal values or increasing/reducing stereotypes, etc.) (Rubin, 1998).

There are several approaches to structuring the broad field of media literacy 1) by skills, 2) by topics, and 3) by concepts (e. g., visual literacy, film literacy, news literacy, etc.). Due to the limited volume of the article, the article provides a brief look at the first two. The academic environment and practitioners from the media, non-governmental organizations, etc., contribute to the development of the concept. For example, the German media “Deutsche Welle” offers to structure the term by splitting it into five general media competencies (Braesel & Karg, 2017):

- **Access to information and media** (find relevant information, check facts, find sources, and statistics);
- **Ability to analyze information** (for example, why data is presented from a certain point of view, why specific people are interviewed in the article, to check the sources, etc.);
- **Create content** (write social media posts, create articles, audio, and video materials);
- **Reflect on / reflect on content** (to understand media user's responsibilities, to think about how journalistic material could be created better, to assess whether there are any hidden motives behind any information);
- **Act and react after concluding** (consciously consume and create media content, report disinformation and hate speech on social media, protect one's data online, etc.).

Considering this explanation of media literacy competencies and comparing the results of the survey conducted in the Baltic States, it can be concluded that the latter competency could be one of the least developed among young people. Namely, an online survey conducted by Samsung

Electronics Baltics between April 10 and April 20, 2022, in collaboration with the research agency Norstat, which involved 909 participants aged 15 to 25, shows that almost half (47%) of young people surveyed in the Baltic States when faced with false information on social media, choose to ignore it (LV portal, 2022).

Taken thematically, the field of media literacy includes issues related to information literacy, such as respect for copyright, non-plagiarism, the ability to find the information needed, and the analysis and understanding of different media formats: image, audio, and audiovisual content, knowledge about social media performance, hate speech, advertising, and many other field-related topics. Thomas P. Mackey and Trudi E. Jacobson (2014) propose the concept of “metaliteracy,” a comprehensive model for information literacy to advance critical thinking and reflection about one’s skills in these fluid and networked spaces. They write: To be “metaliterate requires individuals to understand their existing literacy strengths and areas for improvement and make decisions about their learning. The ability to critically self-assess different competencies and recognize one’s need for integrated literacies in today’s information environment is a metaliteracy.” It follows that not only mechanical media literacy application is required but also the individuals’ ability to critically assess their competencies and skills, identifying gaps and needs for integrated literacies which are necessary, for instance, while using social media where digital skills and those, for example, related to the evaluation of visual and audiovisual content, including, advertising, converge.

In conclusion of this section, several factors are important – people’s ability to use the media, critically evaluate and analyze information, look at this information from a broader perspective and understand the interplay between society and media, media and freedom of expression, diversity of opinion and democracy, as well as the ability to create media content themselves. As the media environment changes, so does the understanding of media literacy. However, even if there is no single interpretation of the concept and it is explained slightly differently (for example, in the UNESCO approach, media literacy is considered together with information literacy (Grizzle et al., 2013)) and depends on the conciseness or breadth of the definition, as we will look further in the section on media literacy in curriculum, it includes sub-skills that are common for various perspectives.

## **Youth media literacy in Latvia: research gaps**

Before addressing media literacy in the curriculum, it is crucial to outline the context briefly. Studies available on Latvian youth media literacy could help understand the possibilities of using scientific data

to provide recommendations for education programs. However, after analyzing studies on Latvian youth media literacy, several shortcomings are identified, making it difficult to see an accurate picture of young people's knowledge and skills related to various forms of media.

To begin with, there are insufficient numbers of such studies. The last comprehensive publicly available media literacy survey for children and young people (9–16 years old) conducted with survey and qualitative interviews was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia in 2017 (Kultūras ministrija, 2018). Its data are seriously outdated, given that the consumption of digital content has developed and applications that have come to the fore have also changed over the years (for example, nowadays, popular social media TikTok in this research was represented by its predecessor app Musical.ly).

A group of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is included in the representative surveys of the Ministry of Culture and the National Electronic Mass Media Council, which take place with some regularity every few years but do not cover the full range of questions relevant to the decision-making about media literacy education. More up-to-date data are provided by studies carried out by private companies, non-governmental organizations, and initiatives. However, they usually only cover a narrow range of issues, such as the interaction between young people and digital content creators (influencers), and cannot be proud of a representative sample. Most often, these are online surveys with 150–300 respondents. However, they also allow insight into the research topic.

At the same time, there is a lack of publicly available data obtained by the qualitative research approach, as the results are primarily based on self-assessment by children and young people, which may not provide an accurate picture of precise information evaluation skills, knowledge, viewpoints or screentime of applications (unless time tracking is used on the devices) that can only be clarified by researching the topic in depth.

Another problematic aspect is the relatively narrow understanding of media literacy, which is reduced to 1) trusting information from friends and acquaintances and social media and 2) sharing information without first checking it. This is also the case for representative surveys, where the youngest age group is 15–24. For example, the latest media literacy survey of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia (2020) found that 64% of 15–24-year-olds believe in information that can be found on social media (e. g., Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, etc.) and 55% share information without checking it. Although the wording of the survey question might raise discussion, the absence of qualitative data means that quantitative surveys provide only a percentage that can be interpreted differently and can only partially help plan media literacy education.

Among the research on youth media literacy, there also is the study by philosophers Ģirts Jankovskis and Maija Jankovska, “Being There and Together: Media Habits of Teens in Latvia” (Jankovskis & Jankovska, 2016) and the study of society researchers Aivita Putniņa, Artūrs Pokšāns, and Māris Brants who focus on gambling addiction, social media addiction, computer gambling addiction and the prevalence of associated behavior and its influencing factors among the Latvian population (Putniņa et al., 2019).

Longitudinal research on youth media literacy has not been conducted in Latvia. It is a valuable experience to learn from United Kingdom’s communications regulator Ofcom, which follows how young people’s young media usage habits change over time, revealing new trends and potential challenges, including what media are preferred and what practical content consumption, analysis, and creation skills children have at a certain age (OFCOM, 2021).

Thus, concluding youth media literacy research in Latvia, it must be supposed that there is currently a lack of up-to-date research data about Latvia to supplement discussions on media literacy issues and skills to be included in the curriculum as achievable results. The next chapter discusses how media literacy is already included in the content of formal education in Latvia.

## **Media literacy in educational standard**

Informally called competence education, the new education standard came into force in Latvia starting the school year 2020/2021. In 2018 and 2019, the government (Cabinet of Ministers) adopted two documents: regulations No. 747 “Regulations Regarding the State Basic Education Standard and Model Basic Education Programmes” (Ministru kabinets, 2018), and regulations No. 416 “Regulations Regarding the State General Secondary Education Standard and Model General Secondary Education Programmes” (Ministru kabinets, 2019).

Six main transversal competencies are to be developed in all study courses. Media literacy is not among these six key competencies but is related to the following competencies – critical thinking and problem solving, civic participation, and digital skills. Although the concept of media literacy as a word cannot be found in these documents and their annexes that define the results to be achieved, several achievable results are relevant to it – formulated with the help of verbs such as analyze, evaluate, select, choose, etc.

Compared to a situation a few years ago, when educating students in media literacy was only a voluntary step for the most enthusiastic teachers, an effort has already been made (Locmele, 2021). Learning outcomes,

mainly related to media literacy, are covered in languages, civic and social learning, cultural awareness, and self-expression in the arts and technology field. For example, in language learning, there is a module, "Media, language and influence," which explains how media construct reality and influence society's perception of the world with encouragement that we can detect effects and manipulation techniques with an in-depth analysis of language tools used in the media. Zane Oliņa, implementing director of School2030 curriculum at the State Centre for Education ESF project "Competency based approach in the curriculum," in a high-level international conference "Media literacy" organized by the National Electronic Media Council in the autumn of 2021. Roadmaps" pointed out that Latvian language teachers have the most significant role in promoting media literacy, as the most extensive set of achievable results is in the field of languages (Oliņa, 2021).

Here are some media literacy-related achievable results in social and civic learning areas:

- Students create digital identities and social use the media responsibly
- Students analyze information from a variety of sources, including the media, and make reasonable arguments
- Students understand the functions and role of media as the fourth power (along with the three state powers – the executive, the decision-making, and the judiciary power).
- Students can find and select facts
- Students understand the impact of the media on politics, the social sphere, public opinion, individual and cultural identity, values, etc.

These skills indicate a relatively diverse understanding of media literacy. However, currently, there is no certainty about implementing the new standard in the classroom with pupils, as in June 2022, no official methodological material has been prepared for the inclusion of media literacy in classroom lessons. Also, teacher training is fragmented, depending on the projects and short-term initiatives, not in a systemic way with a certain regularity. International partners have significantly contributed to teachers' media literacy development. For instance, the Embassy of the United States has supported several teacher training projects at the non-governmental organization Education Development Center. The IREX Baltic Media Literacy Program at the University of Latvia has prepared 16 media literacy lesson plans and tasks for grades 7–9 and 10–12. The Baltic Media Excellence Center and the Latvian Safer Internet Center, among other organizations, also should be mentioned because of their investment in teacher education.

Initiatives of local governments and planning regions to organize media literacy courses for teachers are also worth noting. Although teacher training financially supported by the Ministry of Culture is also provided,

it is addressed to a relatively small number of teachers (the Latvian Media Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020 set the minimum number of teachers to be trained at 35), taking into account the small annual funding of 2598 EUR in recent years (Ministru kabinets, 2016). This may change in developing a new document for the next period, as the previous Latvian media policy guidelines 2016–2020 and their implementation plan ended two years ago.

The survey of the Latvian population shows that teachers are mainly named as a group of society to address media literacy education (teachers (58%), pupils (52%), students (39%), journalists (30%), seniors (26%) (Rožukalne et al., 2020). Although the results of this survey show an uncritical view of society on its skills and knowledge, one could agree that teachers are essential ambassadors for media literacy. Less than ten years ago, James Potter (2013) pointed out that for the need to train teachers in media literacy, their workload should be reduced, referring to research showing that it takes an average of two years to prepare teachers for teaching media literacy themselves. Besides, support should be continued with up-to-date information and materials, rather than leaving the further development of media literacy to the teachers themselves (Potter, 2013). In Latvia, currently, teaching media literacy means taking responsibility for themselves in search of materials and methodology. However, it is planned that in the following months National Electronic Mass Media Council will establish an online repository with topic-related materials made in Latvia. Teachers also might benefit from content aggregation in one place.

The family of young people and the worldview, media usage habits, and opinions obtained from the close circle are also essential factors determining media literacy skills and viewpoints (Potter, 2013), such as the opinion on the necessity of independent media, support for conspiracy theories, etc. Therefore, it is crucial to work with the whole family in media literacy education, involving parents in the activities organized by the school, so that the acquisition of media literacy takes place both at the micro-level in the family and at the macro-level – in public education.

Teachers are not the only ones who can help students to acquire the skills and knowledge in educational institutions. Librarians can also play a vital role in media pedagogy, assisting the teachers in finding ways to promote media literacy in their subjects, inspiring and supporting students in accessing, evaluating, and developing their information, including by engaging young people in media literacy and offering binding examples (Kine & Davidsons, 2021; Hernandez, 2018; Malmberg, 2014).

It is also a question worth exploring on how to reach out to young people who are outside the education system for some reasons or have health problems that allow them to use the media but determine difficulty

evaluating information critically, or are with functional impairments such as hearing or vision problems which means that media literacy educational content should be available in a variety of formats.

## Conclusions

The article provides answers to all three research questions. Few studies on media literacy among young people in Latvia have been published in the last five years. Most of them are surveys conducted by companies or private initiatives on a narrow range of questions and a relatively small number of respondents. Young people are one of the age groups (15–24 years old) in media literacy studies commissioned by public authorities. However, they also represent a group of young people with less than two hundred respondents, which following the principles of representative sampling, can be characterized as too narrow, and address general media literacy and media use issues without specializing in topics that could be more conducive to improving educational standards. It should also be noted that most studies are quantitative without offering a deeper explanation of the results.

Therefore, when developing the Latvian Media policy guidelines and their implementation plan for the next period, it would be desirable to envisage not only a general media literacy survey of the Latvian population but also a media literacy survey for children and adolescents (or youth) and funding from the state budget at least once every three years. To summarize the answer to the second question of the study, as the data is outdated, it is more difficult to predict young people's exact and current needs to improve their media literacy, but this can be deduced, for example, from research abroad. However, the context varies slightly from country to country.

Summarizing the answer to the third research question on whether and how media literacy is included in the latest educational standard documents in Latvia – in the educational standard, which was introduced at the start of the 2020/2021 school year, media literacy is not one of the transversal competencies. However, it is linked to competencies such as critical thinking and problem-solving, civic participation, and digital skills. There are several media literacy issues among the learning outcomes, especially in language and social and civic fields of study. However, the main concern is the actual and practical implementation of this standard in classes with students, as there is still a lack of supporting methodological materials and regular and systematic teacher education in media literacy in Latvia. Training is mainly fragmented and dependent on project funding from international partners, NGOs, etc. Although the media policy planning document prepared by the Ministry of Culture provides funding for teachers' media literacy training, it is too small (approximately two

and a half thousand euros) to provide comprehensive and complimentary training on the rapidly changing media environment and media literacy education methodologies. The situation could be improved if funds were delivered from the state budget and a system for conducting training was established.

James Potter points out that three principles are essential in promoting media literacy in formal education – curriculum design, teaching, and assessment (Potter, 2013). In Latvia, we should develop all these three factors. Formal education is not the only source of media literacy for young people. However, it is one of the most important in assessing the possibilities of covering young people and providing media literacy education systematically rather than fragmentary.

However, there are also opportunities to address and reach young people in non-formal education. The Ministry of Culture organizes various media literacy events for young people in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, state and local government institutions, such as the National Library of Latvia and municipal libraries, universities (including those where students can take media literacy courses, such as the University of Latvia, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Riga Stradiņš University), as well as non-governmental organizations (Safer Internet Center of Latvian Internet Association, Latvian Debate Association, etc.), international partners (IREX, British Council, Nordic Council of Ministers, Goethe Institute in Riga), various initiatives of private companies and media, including public service media. The cooperation of all these actors and the provision of educational activities at all levels are essential for successful and complementary media literacy education. However, media literacy in formal education is at its core.

Although, in general, young people are relatively easier to reach with educational content than other groups in society, there are still some challenges, including how to address those:

- who have already completed formal education and are passive (do not attend seminars and events devoted to this topic) and do not use the Latvian language media to be reached by campaigns in media?
- who have dropped out of the educational process (e. g., with incomplete or only basic education – nine grades)?
- who have functional visual, hearing, or other health problems that make it difficult to perceive/understand information while using media content?

This paper gives an initial summary of opportunities to promote media literacy through the education system in Latvia. The topic can be developed in several directions – first, by finding out the opinion of teachers, interviewing or conducting focus groups with them to research how media

literacy is practically invented in the classroom, and looking at the experience of different schools (Riga and Latvian regions) and teachers' needs for support such as media literacy materials and its preferred content.

Secondly, conducting a study of young people's media literacy, which, among other things, involves questions about media literacy education. A media literacy survey of children and adolescents (9–16 years old) accompanied by interviews conducted in 2017 revealed that only rare issues of media literacy and digital literacy were covered at school; young people learned them primarily through self-study or with the help of friends and family members (parents or older siblings). In 2022, a master's thesis was defended at the Department of Political Studies of the University of Latvia, which traces the level of media literacy of Latvian students and the factors influencing it, including the language of instruction (Rutkis, 2022). Thus, there is an opportunity to develop this topic in pedagogy, communication science, and even politics, studying the content of education itself, the media policy implemented by the state, and teachers and pupils/students as recipients of media literacy education.

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