

# Media Literacy for Shared Reality: Different Discourses of the Project “Media Literacy and Information Literacy Classes in Educational Institutions of the Eastern Border Regions of Latvia”

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**Abstract.** The current global direction of thinking in the field of media literacy and information literacy aims towards the fact that media literacy in society begins with the promotion of media literacy in the audiences of children and young people. The article is dedicated to various aspects of the project “Media literacy and information literacy classes in educational institutions of the eastern border regions of Latvia” of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, – a study of value to the Latvian society, implemented in the autumn of 2022 by the teaching staff and researchers of the Department of Communication Studies, the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Latvia. In the current complex geopolitical situation, the project initiative is highly topical, focused and purposeful, because the attitude towards the Russia’s war in Ukraine at the eastern border of Latvia is ambiguous amongst different audiences, even within the audience of pupils. The voluminous, content-rich presentation reached almost 1000 pupils of 21 schools along the eastern border of Latvia.

**Keywords:** media literacy education, schoolchildren, Ministry of Culture, Russia-Ukraine war, Latvia’s eastern border

## Introduction

The UNESCO global conference “Internet for Trust”, which took place at the end of February 2023 in Paris, has yielded an important conclusion – that media literacy should be taught to different age groups in different ways (one size does not fit all), and the most important thing is to focus on the audience of children and young people, because media literacy in society starts at this level. The conference panel, which was dedicated specifically to teaching media literacy to children and youth audiences, recommended that schools should attract young

people who are themselves organic social media users as guest speakers to teach media literacy.<sup>1</sup>

The teaching staff and researchers of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Latvia Faculty of Social Sciences have made a significant contribution to the promotion of media literacy in Latvian schools over the past year. Last autumn, a project by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia “Media literacy and information literacy classes in the educational institutions of the eastern border regions of Latvia” was successfully implemented. Within the said project, the researchers – Laura Ardava-Āboliņa, Klinta Ločmele, Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe, Velta Skolmeistere, Viktorija Tkačenko, Raivis Vilūns and Kaspars Līcītis organised classes for 993 pupils from 21 schools located in the territory adjacent to the eastern border of Latvia. The comprehensive presentation, developed by assistant professor and well-known media literacy expert in Latvia, Klinta Ločmele, was aimed at improving the media literacy and information literacy of ninth- to twelfth-grade youth in Latgale schools in the context of Russia’s military operations in Ukraine, countering the spread of disinformation, promoting its recognition and identification of the obvious risks.

Communication with Latgale schools and active planning of classes commenced at the beginning of the academic year 2022/2023. In total, almost 40 schools were approached. For the most part, school administration and teachers responded positively and welcomed the project initiative, stressing that they also devoted a lot of attention to teaching media literacy to pupils on a daily basis. However, there were also refusals from some schools on the grounds that “the topic is overly politicized”, “there are some pro-Putin students in the class”, or the reluctance to cooperate as such was expressed indirectly by not giving an answer or delaying it. This confirmed the necessity of the project, the need for the right focus and the appropriate moment of project implementation even more persuasively, because the attitude towards the Russian war in Ukraine in the territories adjacent to the eastern border of Latvia is certainly ambiguous even amongst the audience of pupils.

## Methodology

At the beginning of the autumn semester of 2022, the researchers of the project “Media literacy and information literacy classes in the educational institutions of the eastern border regions of Latvia” searched for the schools located in the territories adjacent to the eastern border and retrieved their contact information using the social network of schools [Mykoob.lv](https://mykoob.lv). The researchers contacted these schools

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1 More about the conference – on the UNESCO website: <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-conference>

and planned the classes (the lessons). Almost 40 schools were approached, and the classes in form of guest lectures were conducted in 21 schools, reaching 993 pupils. An important task of the guest lecturers at the conclusion of each class was to obtain feedback from the pupils. After each class, the pupils were asked four simple but important questions and invited to raise their hands, if they wanted to answer in the affirmative: 1) Did the pupil like the class? 2) Would the pupil like to attend similar classes in the future? 3) Did the pupil know what the media literacy was previously, before the class? 4) What new, memorable things did the pupil learn? The last question was an open-ended one, providing an opportunity for the pupils to give their answers verbally.

### Latvia's eastern border, problematic aspects and media literacy

The eastern border of Latvia is considered to be a part of Latgale region, located along the border of Latvia with Russia and Belarus. One of the most problematic aspects concerning the residents of this region has been the influence of the Russian media and the discourses created by them, which has even resulted in many of these inhabitants living in the Russian information space. With the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine, this problem acquired the dimensions of a national security issue.

Latvia in general faces medium-level risks pertaining to media pluralism, although media policy in Latvia is oriented towards media pluralism. Media choice in Latvia is largely determined by ethnic group and geographical factors. Representatives of different ethnic groups in Latvia acquire their daily information from different sources; Latvians generally trust and use the media in Latvian, whereas the Russian-speaking inhabitants have preferred the TV channels controlled by the Russian government. The war of Russia in Ukraine has affected Latvian media environment, as the broadcasting of several Russian television channels has been officially banned in Latvia. The media environment in Latvia has always been divided into two information spaces (Media Pluralism Monitor 2022).

As the geopolitical situation grew complicated, work and time spent with the school audience became essential, because media literacy in society begins here. Media literacy serves as a form of educational mediation that guides young pupils to consume the media critically and wisely. Over the years, media educators have developed different approaches to media literacy education. There are at least five media-literacy education approaches adopted by media educators in different countries and at different stages. The **approach of inoculation** aims at protecting young people against negative media messages. The **critical analytical approach** teaches young people to deconstruct the hidden ideology and the values of media messages. The **media arts approach** emphasises enjoyment

of the media. Media production and consumption are regarded as an interesting, creative, participatory approach. **Social participatory approach** focuses on letting active citizens play a constructive role in media democracy, whereas **reflective media production approach** is the combination of critical analysis and production. This approach stresses the importance of respecting young pupils' subjective media experiences and social backgrounds, allowing pupils to try producing and examples of media content themselves, on the basis of their own everyday life perspectives (De Abreu *et al.* 2017, 1–2).

Guest lectures within the project “Media literacy and information literacy classes in the educational institutions of the eastern border regions of Latvia” correspond to the critical analytical approach, as they aim to teach the audience of pupils the different ways and techniques of recognizing misinformation.

## Results

When giving feedback at the end of the classes, the overwhelming majority of pupils found the class to be simultaneously valuable and interesting. 74% of the surveyed pupils responded that they liked the classes, 65% wanted similar classes in the future, while only 22% of the surveyed pupils answered that they previously (already) knew what media literacy was. The pupils noted that the most valuable newly acquired knowledge was related to deep fakes, hate speech, the possibility to check the authenticity of images on the Internet, as well as the operation of the *Tik Tok* algorithm – a process concerning the media platform of great popularity amongst the pupils themselves. In the class, the pupils also learned that “information on the Internet cannot be trusted”, “information must be verified”, “videos can be faked”, “*Tik Tok* has a lot of false information”, “that there are specialised fact-checking organizations”, “that deep fakes are created with the help of artificial intelligence”, “before sharing some kind of a post, you need to evaluate the information”.

The variety of attitudes towards the war in Ukraine in the schools of the Latgale region was extremely diverse – from openly unkind attitudes all the way to the presentation of homemade thank-you gifts in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Thus, for example, lecturer Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe visited five schools in Rezekne. She experienced regional border issues and problems both in the audiences of pupils and teachers. She discovered the presence of an opinion “everything is not so clear-cut” in the young people’s attitude towards the current events – what is told in educational institutions and Latvian media often confronts what the children hear at home in conversations with their parents. Individual pupils and also an individual teacher questioned the work of Latvian journalists, saying that journalists did commissioned work, that they were paid for publishing a certain type of information, and made other similar statements.

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LATVIJAS AVĪZE  
Otrdiena, 22. novembris, 2022.

LATVIJĀ

# Kad arī skolēniem "viss nav tik viennozīmīgi"

Latgales skolās pētnieki saskaras ar jauniešu dažādo attieksmi pret Krievijas iebrukumu Ukrainā

ILZE KUZMINA

"Prātu dažkārt ir pārāk slikti, lai filtrētu informāciju, un tieši tādos brīžos mūs esam dzīvē dezinformācija", tāds ir viens no brīdinājumiem, ko paši komunikācijas zinātnes maģistrs Kaspars Līcītis. Viņš ir viens no sešiem pētniekiem, kas Kultūras ministrijas (KM) un Latvijas Universitātes (LŪ) nodarības projekta "Medijpratības un informācijprasības nodarības Latvijas austrumu pierobežas reģionu mācību iestādēs" ietvaros devās uz Latvijas pierobežas skolām, lai runātu ar skolēniem par medijpratību un informācijprasību. Nodarības notika 21 skolā, tajās piedalījās 993 skolēni no 9. līdz 12. klasei.

Medijpratība ir viens no prasmēm, kas ļoti nepieciešama mūsdienu cilvēkam. Jo sevišķi šobrīd, kad notiek karš Ukrainā, un saistībā ar to ir daudz dezinformācijas. Taču, lai veicinātu sabiedrības vienotību, nodarības tiek runātas arī par naidīgu runu: ar ko tā ir būtams un kāpēc tieši šobrīd būtu īpaši jāizvairās no kāda aizskaršanas, piemēram, tautības dēļ.

**Uzkras pat pētnieki**

"Latvijas Avīzē" bija kļāt viens no šādām nodarībām Preiļi Valsts ģimnāzijā, kur medijpratību apguvē piedalījās 11. klases skolēni.

Kā viens no bistamākajiem dezinformācijas izplatītājiem šobrīd ir saimniec



Lāčplēša dienā Preiļi Valsts ģimnāzijas skolēni piedalījās medijpratības nodarībā.

ILZES KUZMINA S FOTO



vērtē. Tomēr arī K. Līcītis izbrīnījās kāda skolēna jautājumam, kāpēc Latvija vispār nosaukums Ukrainas pusē, bet pētnieks to labprāt izskaidroja.

Vēl viena projekta pētniece, LŪ komunikācijas zinātnu doktora grāda pretendente Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe "Latvijas Avīzē" atklāja, ka viņa bijusi arī maszkomunikāciju skolā, un atsevišķos gadījumos nācies secināt, ka tur skolēni ne vienmēr piekļāv valsts nostājai par karu Ukrainā, par Krieviju kā agresoru. Nebūjusi gan tā, ka skolēni atklāti atbalsta Krieviju, taču vairākārt no viņu pusēs izskanēja, ka "viss nav tik vieno-

Tas, ka jaunieši nevarēs paust savu atšķirīgo viedokli, varētu liecināt par viņu cīņņu pārliecību un noteikta viedokļa domināšanu atsevišķās skolēnu grupās," secināja projekta pētniece. "Tāpēc šādās nodarībās lietotāku pieredzi par Krievijas lietoto dezinformāciju ir jābūt gataviem atklāti runāt arī par citām informatīvās kara ierīcībām, jo prečā gādījumā skolēnu un atsevišķos gadījumos arī pedagogu spēja uzturēt un ieklausīties šādos sarunās, iestājoties noraidošā un visu štatistiku apšaubošā pozā."

Vēl kāda nianse: kaut A. Tetarenko-Supe runāja latviski, skolēni itaļieku krieviski. Pētniece tam nav iebildusi, bažijoties, ka citādi viņš nelādā saruna nesasāks.

Atšķirība starp latviešu un krievu skolām bijusi arī tāda, ka latviešu skolās skolotāji uzturēja projekta lēktoriem, atstāja ar skolēniem vietas vietas, bet krievu skolās nodarības laikā kļāt bija arī pedagogs.

**Joprojām liela Krievijas ietekme**

Tieši pierobežas skolēniem informācija par medijpratību visvairāk vajadzīga tāpēc, ka tieši austrumu pierobežā Krievijas mediju ietekme joprojām ir vislielākā, skaidroja K. Līcītis. Piemēram, Krievijas televīzija, neraugoties uz aizliegumiem, daudviet iedzīvotājiem

Figure. Screenshot of the press publication of a journalist of "Latvijas Avīze" newspaper on one of the guest lectures at the Preiļi State Gymnasium. Lecturer Kaspars Līcītis during his presentation

In her turn, the visits of lecturer Klinta Ločmele in four schools around Balvi generated a pleasant sentiment. At the school in Ruģāji, after the presentation she received hand-made wrist warmers in the colours of the Ukrainian flag as a gift. She values this as a very touching experience, because it was a specially prepared greeting of a warm, symbolic character – the warmth of the hands and thoughts about Ukraine were invested in making the gloves, including the consideration for Ukrainian people and their struggle for independence. Klinta Ločmele stored the present on the shelf as an emotionally valuable souvenir, but this gift also been useful in practice – in autumn, before the start of the heating season, while working at the computer, it warmed the wrists.<sup>2</sup>

2 More about the emotions engendered during the project: Ardava-Āboliņa, L. (2023). Medijpratība – vienotai realitātes izpratnei skolēnu vidū [Media literacy – for a unified understanding of reality among students]. *Avantūra*, 16, 14–15.

In general, the project's activities received positive media coverage on both national and regional media, including the periodicals, e.g., "Latvijas Avīze", in the afternoon broadcast "Pēcpusdiena" by the Latvian Radio, in Latgale regional paper "Latgales Vietējā Avīze", "Rēzeknes Vēstis" in both Latvian and Russian-language issues. It is significant that Ilze Kuzmina, a journalist of "Latvijas Avīze" newspaper, participated in one of the guest lectures in order to reflect this event in her report. The respective lecture took place on Lāčplēšis Day (a celebration dedicated to Latvian National Armed Forces) at the Preiļi State Gymnasium.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that as the coverage of the project in the media increased, the schools' trust in this initiative did likewise, therefore it can be concluded that the media heightens the perception of reliability and trust of various activities in the society.

## Conclusions

The project "Media literacy and information literacy classes in the educational institutions of the eastern border regions of Latvia" can be assessed as highly effective, because the attitude towards Russia's war in Ukraine on the eastern border of Latvia is really ambiguous even among the schoolchildren. Pupils use thinking frameworks that are likely to be acquired from their families or independent media consumption.

The diversity of collective memories and attitudes towards the war in Ukraine, which prevails within the schools of Latgale region, is further confirmed by the different attitudes that the project researchers received from communication with the schools. However, for the most part, the attitude of school principals and teachers was positive. They admitted that they also paid a lot of attention to these topics on a daily basis. A positive response was corroborated by the requests of several teachers to receive the project presentation for future use in the learning process, as well as the desire to combine classes, to give the opportunity for this presentation to be heard in the school assembly, thus gathering as many pupils as possible.

An important conclusion about the management of this project is that a well-considered and timely information campaign plays a very crucial role in successful implementation of the project. Gradually, as the coverage of the project in the media gained momentum, the schools' trust in this project initiative also increased, therefore it can be concluded that the media reinforces the perception of reliability and trust of various activities in the eyes of the society.

However, the war in Ukraine continues, and so do the opportunities for researchers to promote media literacy. The work of promoting media literacy

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3 Kuzmina, I. (2022). Kad arī skolēniem "viss nav tik vienojīmīgi" [When all is not as "unequivocal as it might seem" with the students]. *Latvijas Avīze*, Nov. 22, p. 4.

in the schools of Latvia will by no means cease. Teaching staff and researchers of the Communication Studies Department of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Latvia from September 2023 to May 2024 will implement an even larger project of the Ministry of Culture – “Media Literacy Classes in Latvian Educational Institutions”, which envisages performing extensive media literacy training for pupils throughout Latvia, augmenting the team with the teaching staff of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences. The aim of the project is to provide classes in Latvian educational institutions, promoting young people’s media literacy and information literacy, raising awareness of disinformation, information security, new information technologies and innovations, algorithms and other topics. The aim is to visit 80 Latvian schools in less than a year.

This project, with its format of guest lectures and the goal of reaching as many pupils as possible in each of the schools, fits into the critical analytical approach to teaching media literacy. Still, it should be taken into account that in the literature of media literacy, the following processes are manifested and focused on reflective media production approach that combines the critical analysis and production of media content from the perspectives of the pupils’ daily lives. Notably, this approach requires systematic work amongst numerically small pupils’ audiences and is incomparably more time-consuming. Let this approach serve as a target for future projects.

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