

“It’s complicated, but we put it “simply”. Analysis of the media literacy framing in Latvian Media Support Fund projects (2018 - 2020)

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“É complicado, mas simplificamos”: Análise do enquadramento da literacia mediática em projetos do Fundo de Apoio aos *Media* da Letónia (2018-2020)

Resumo (PT): Este estudo examina o enquadramento das questões de literacia mediática e de informação em projetos financiados pelo Fundo de Apoio aos *Media* da Letónia, discutindo-se a qualidade profissional dos conteúdos relacionados com a literacia mediática e de informação (LMI) com os beneficiários do projeto e especialistas em *media*. O estudo emprega o modelo ideológico de literacia, vinculando-o a uma abordagem metajornalística, para explorar as mudanças na epistemologia profissional jornalística relacionadas com a LMI. Empregando três conjuntos de dados (inquéritos a jornalistas e editores, análise do enquadramento dos conteúdos LMI e entrevistas semiestruturadas qualitativas), a investigação conclui que a representação da LMI nos *media* comerciais é principalmente superficial e não é oferecido ao público o alcance das competências da LMI apropriadas para o entendimento do seu contexto. Os conteúdos relativos a LMI nos *media* são representados através de um enquadramento educacional, de advertência e formal da LMI.

Palavras-chave: Literacia mediática e de informação, Abordagem metajornalística, Epistemologia do jornalismo, Modelo ideológico de literacia, Jornalismo de Estado.

“It’s complicated, but we put it “simply”. Analysis of the MIL framing in Latvian Media Support Fund projects (2018 - 2020)

Abstract (EN): This study examines the framing of media and information literacy issues in media projects financed by the Latvian Media Support Fund and discusses the professional quality of media and information literacy (MIL) related content with project beneficiaries and media experts. The study uses the ideological model of literacy, linking it with the metajournalistic approach to explore changes in MIL-related journalistic professional epistemology. Employing the three datasets (journalists and editors’ survey, framing analysis of MIL-focused media content, and qualitative semi-structured interviews), the research concludes that MIL representation in the commercial media is mostly superficial, and the audience is not offered the range of MIL competencies appropriate for the contemporary understanding of the notion. MIL content in the media is represented using educational, warning, and formal MIL framing.

Keywords: Media and information literacy, Metajournalistic approach, Journalism epistemology, Ideological model of literacy, State-supported journalism.

Introduction

Media literacy is a prerequisite for the development of a pluralistic media environment. With the help of media literacy, individuals can execute basic rights like freedom of expression and access to information (UNESCO, 2013). Discussing opportunities to provide society with the necessary competencies, scholars have concluded that there is a need for a joint framework for media and information literacy (MIL) (Trültzsch-Wijnen, Murru, & Papaioannou, 2017; UNESCO, 2019; Jones-Jang, Mortensen, & Liu, 2021).

MIL in Latvia had no formal distinction up until 2016 when the first-ever media politics guidelines in Latvia were accepted (Ministru Kabinets, 2016). Since 2020, media literacy has been included as an integrated competency in the general education program (Skola, 2022).

One of the five core principles in Latvia's media politics is dedicated to media literacy. The Latvian society expects that professional media would offer information on MIL (Rožukalne, Skulte & Stakle, 2020). Public opinion survey data shows that 43% of the residents would like to learn about media literacy from mass media (LF, 2020). Gradually, the Latvian residents' interest in MIL grows: in a 2019 survey 42% of respondents said they were interested in MIL issues (Rožukalne *et al.*, 2020); in 2020, the figure was 58% (LF, 2020).

The presence of Russian government-controlled media and the impact of Russian official propaganda in Latvia, where over a third of residents use the Russian language at home (Central Statistical Bureau, 2021) and many consume the content of Russian TV channels (LF, 2020, 2021), is one of the reasons why media literacy and resilience of the media environment are among the basic principles of the Latvian media politics.

The fight against disinformation and improving the audience's media literacy are among the priorities of the Latvian Media Support Fund (MSF) acting since 2017. The Fund provides direct support to commercial media and is financed by taxpayers' money (1,2 – 3,5 million EUR per year). MSF funds are allocated to several categories linked to MIL: media literacy, deconstruction of lies, and combating disinformation.

Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the bloody war taking place there led to a reassessment of the priorities and successes of the MIL activities in Latvia, as well as the role of the media in the integration of society. Public opinion data obtained in April 2022 showed that 20% of Latvian Russian-speaking residents support Russia in this war, but more than half refrain from expressing sympathy for any of the parties involved in the war (LSM/LETA, 2022, May 3). Later, support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine dropped to 13% of Russian-speaking respondents. These data raised questions about the impact of war propaganda on society communication culture and broadened the debate about the long-term significance of MIL and understanding a set of important MIL skills and competences (Lastovskis, 2022, September 22).

This study focuses on the content under the media literacy category created within the MSF framework and discussions about this content, using the ideological model of literacy and meta journalistic approach.

Conceptual framework

We use the meta journalistic approach to explore both how journalists themselves perceive their role in media literacy development, what borders emerge between journalists' duties and society when accentuating the topic, and how media experts and professional organization representatives assess journalists' work. To add various perspectives to the meta journalistic analysis, we find it important that in the study, journalists' self-perception and professional quality level when presenting MIL to audience is compared to content devoted to MIL.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyse how MIL is framed in the Latvian media content and how journalists and media experts assess MIL via the meta journalistic approach.

A simple but widely used media literacy definition is used, namely, that it is the skill to decode, analyse, and produce messages of different form and content (Koltay, 2011; Mihailidis, 2005) and to participate in a multifaceted communication by reaching different communication goals in different contexts (Livingstone, 2004). This definition describes a holistic view at media literacy (Singh & Banga, 2022), uniting access and use or information literacy with understanding and assessment in one concept: media and

information literacy (MIL) (UNESCO, 2019). On the one hand, MIL as a support category characterizes an important priority of media politics and include a broad range of media topics and issues. MIL also includes media critique as part of the meta-journalistic discourse (Candlin, 2014). On the other hand, in terms of media politics, media literacy competencies help to create society's resilience against disinformation and the spread of fake news. Therefore, the study includes MSF projects concerning several interlinked MSF categories: media literacy (explanation of media role and media use), disinformation and lies deconstruction (e.g., tackling false information, fact checking, interpretation of propaganda issues, political communication), media critique (critical analysis of mass media performance and accountability).

We hypothesize that the public's understanding of media literacy is influenced by the media attention paid to MIL and public's perception of MIL is guided by MIL framing in the content of professional media. Moreover, first, the attitude of the media is determined by how media professionals assess the importance of MIL. Secondly, MIL representation is determined by journalists understanding of their task to provide information about MIL issues.

To test the hypothesis, we have defined the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the representation and framing of media literacy in the content of Latvian commercial media?
- RQ2: How do the professionals involved in MSF-supported projects and media experts in Latvia perceive the necessary professional approaches to the creation of media literacy-related content?

1. Literature review

1.1. The ideological model of literacy

The ideological model of literacy developed by Brian Street (1984, 1994, 2006) is appropriate for the interpretation of our research data as it allows us to seek a new paradigm in literacy studies, expanding the idea of a literate person. It provides an opportunity to build an understanding of MIL in connection with, first, the development

of technology and the impact of technology on culture, and secondly, it offers a critical view of the interpretation of literacy in a specific time and in a specific society.

In 1980s, Brian Street (1994) offered an Ideological literacy model which considers the formation of literacy in its social context, referring to the French semiologist Paolo Freire's (Leaning, 2017) ideas. It was one of the proposals that sought to define what it means to be a literate person, placing the understanding of literacy in an actual context, thus giving it flexibility and dynamism. According to this model the education process is not viewed as autonomous and individual, but embedded within a framework of societal values, norms, and practices. Therefore, the model involves social practice aspects in the notion of literacy and does not ignore the rapid development of technology and the social, economic, and cultural transformation linked to it (Street, 1994, Street, 2006). The literacy process is therefore dependent on technology development and distribution processes that are influenced by dominant practices in culture. From the point of view of this model, technology is understood as a form of culture, which is produced in a given time and society by that society, which creates and adapts technology under influence of many cultural, political and ideological factors (Street, 1994). Street's interpretation of literacy includes a different number of literacies within the general concept of literacy, and these 'many' literacies appear and develop only in practice. Therefore, one concept of literacy cannot be automatically adopted and applied to the analysis of any time and any society, because this model interprets literacy as an ideological construct that enforces the perspective of a certain dominant class or social group (Rožukalne *et al.*, 2020).

We use the ideological model of literacy to analyze the understanding of MIL from the perspective of media policy (the state), media practice (journalists, media industry) and the individual (media users), because this analysis inevitably characterizes the power relations that are manifested in the interpretation of MIL and the importance given to MIL in the context of other literacies.

1.2. Metajournalism approach

Metajournalism is often understood as journalists' discussion about their own professional boundaries (Carlson, 2016), defining the main criteria and responsibility of their job (Perreault, & Perreault, 2021). However, metajournalistic discourse is not just the talk by journalists themselves; it also includes the discussion by social media users,

specialists and organizations representing the audience's interest. By evaluating journalists' jobs and defining the quality criteria, the transformation of journalism is also clarified (Perreault, & Perreault, 2021), bringing up new duties, topics, and other challenges. Metajournalistic discourse allows understanding of how journalists prioritize their role, tasks, and responsibilities, all the while checking whether media professionals' self-perception corresponds to the audiences' perspective. The study uses metajournalistic approach to understand how the epistemology of journalists' work changes under the influence of MIL-related processes (Candlin, 2014; Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Ekström, Lewis, & Westlund, 2020), i.e., how professional norms and routines, journalist standards and authority in providing society with knowledge on specific issues, are defined and assessed.

Representation of various issues related to MIL in the media reminds not only that metajournalism is explained as 'journalism about journalism' but explains that defining journalistic practice is socially constructed (Ferrucci, 2018). Metajournalism approach helps to understand how journalists understand their responsibilities in connection with MIL and how the performance of journalists is evaluated outside the media. Ferruci (2018) emphasizes that the evaluation of journalism is not just a binary action that takes place between the media industry and the audiences, because other players participate in the evaluation of journalism e.g., bloggers, social media users, politicians, creators of political communication, etc., and interpretative communities are formed. Analyzing data on the MIL framework in our study, we will find out how the duty to provide MIL-related content affects the professional activities of journalists (choice of topics, assigning MIL-related news value, selection of sources) and how professional skills are improved (recognition of misinformation, fact-checking), as well as how professional quality in MIL representation is evaluated.

1.3. MIL and media professionals

MIL is a crucial theme in analyzing social-political processes, but it is not extensively covered in academic literature in connection with journalists' duties and the epistemology of journalism. Though one of the self-defined functions of media is education, and the task of journalists is to cultivate a well-informed audience (Clark, 2013), in academic research, media literacy is normally linked with media policy (Trültzsch-Wijnen *et al.*, 2017) and education policy (Chu, & Lee, 2014), research also looks at MIL role in the journalist education process (Christ, 2004; Mihailidis, 2005; Mihailidis, 2009; Chu, &

Lee, 2014, Ashley, 2015). The meaning of MIL is researched more in connection with public media to provide society with MIL skills (Skippage, 2020).

Steen Steensen (2019) explicitly defines that the contemporary public communication processes have caused an 'epistemic crisis' in journalism. It is characterized by the situation that the existing journalist competencies do not correspond to the contemporary information-society challenges, and journalists find it increasingly difficult to form a trusting relationship with their audience and prove their authority and responsibility. The author assumes that media and journalists can lose their role in society if they do not refresh their MIL competencies (Steensen, 2019, 185). This idea goes in line with a study result concluding that MIL education should focus more on the social-political context of media activity (Ashley, Maksl & Craft, 2013).

A study analyzing the opportunities of the practical application of different literacies (media literacy, news literacy, information literacy) in recognizing fake news concluded that information literacy skills have greater importance (Jones-Jang, Mortensen, & Liu, 2021). A project aiming to bring attention to students' knowledge about the role of media in society and media effects in a global media environment concluded that for students, self-reflection on their existing views and a possibility to compare them with a broader viewpoint is the most beneficial (Clark, 2013).

The development of disinformation and polarized communication has encouraged interest in MIL as the most popular response mechanism that could help in creating a critical attitude by media users against the messages and work of media. Using the French philosopher Guy Debord's ideas on a society of the spectacle and scholar Douglas Kellner's beliefs on the role of media performance in the contemporary media-ridden environment where facts have less importance than before, authors discuss media literacy as useful competencies with the help of which media texts and their meanings are deconstructed and analyzed (Mihailidis, & Viotty, 2017). Scholars encourage redefining media literacy priorities, abandoning the normative understanding and political focus. To define how MIL can help to understand the socio-political and cultural issues crucial for democracy, the process of MIL exploration must be examined. Thus, media literacy should no longer be viewed as a structural issue, instead redefined as a public participation issue (Mihailidis, & Viotty, 2017).

2. Method and data

The research design for the study was based on the usage of a mixed method¹. The MSF beneficiaries' survey provides an opportunity to find out how media representatives assess the importance of media literacy projects. The qualitative research methods concern the framing analysis of media literacy content and the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews to find out the views of the MSF beneficiaries and media experts. Qualitative research methods contribute quantitative data by interpreting opinions, values, and motivations (Mārtinsone, Pipere, & Kamerāde, 2016).

A study of media content was conducted via methods of qualitative and quantitative content analysis, thereby creating a framing analysis of the published content. The longitudinal study was conducted in 2019, 2020, and 2021, using the same methodology and obtaining comparable data².

The study data are comprised of three datasets: the survey of MSF-supported media literacy project beneficiaries (107 respondents), MSF content analysis (189 publications) and framing analysis (85 publications), and qualitative semi-structured interviews (16 interviews) (Table no. 1).

¹ The study data were obtained and compiled after the study authors acquired the right to assess the Latvian Media Support Fund's financed project content by way of a competition organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia. The rules defined by the Culture Ministry were observed in creating the research design.

² In the MSF project assessment of 2020, the media literacy projects were not highlighted in the rules. Therefore, content analysis is carried out in the study, but framing analysis is not conducted. As far as possible, the media literacy project content for 2018, 2019, and 2020 is compared.

Table no 1. Datasets and data volume (2019 – 2020).

Year	Number of MSF projects analysed	Number of publications analysed	Number of survey participants	Number of interviews
2018	18	49	28	5
2019	16	36	35	5
2020	27	104	44	5
Total (2018 – 2020)	61	189 (111 MIL publications)	107	15

The study was conducted in three stages:

- 1) To find out the MSF financing beneficiaries’ opinion on media literacy programs and the possibilities to create high-quality content on media literacy, a beneficiary survey was created (over 70% of MSF project participants responded each year).
- 2) Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was applied to the content of MSF’s media literacy projects. Framing analysis supplements media agenda analysis (de Vreese, 2005), bringing the presentation and interpretation of the topic to the forefront instead of the importance of the message (Entman, 1993, 52). The present study uses inductive framing analysis (De Vreese, 2005). Qualitative content analysis was used to identify how MIL topics and problems are framed in the media content, as well as identifying aspects of journalistic professional quality, such as topic-appropriate headlines, sensational language, and other aspects of professional ethics.
- 3) To interpret content analysis data and survey results, interviews with MSF beneficiaries, media experts were conducted. To identify and interpret qualitative data, a thematic analysis of interviews was carried analysing qualitative interview data via reflexive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The main categories of the interviews with experts included the evaluation of the quality of MIL representation, for example, the assessment of MIL

understanding, the choice of topics and sources of information about MIL issues, interpretation of MIL skills, professional problems of debunking disinformation, promotion of critical thinking in society.

3. Results

3.1. Survey: MIL themes in the media

The MSF survey questions were answered by 28 recipients in 2018, 35 in 2019, and 44 in 2020, corresponding to the minimum 70% set out in the statutes. Of 10 survey's questions, three were devoted to MIL issues.

In 2018, asked which of the 19 mentioned MIL aspects (several responses allowed) were important for their *audience*, respondents indicated information literacy (14), MIL for different groups of society (12) and the media role in a democracy (11). Importance is also given to the understanding of mass media's role and activities (10), as well as information accessibility (9). Respondents do not think visual literacy (0) and the state's role in MIL promotion (0) are important, whereas lesser importance is given to the digital literacy of children and youth (1), media education at school (3) and health and environmental aspects (2).

Answering the question of which of the 19 media literacy aspects were important for the *editorial*, the most frequent responses were information literacy (13), the ability to recognize political messages (11) and the media's role in democracy (10).

Commenting on the questions and answers of the survey, the editor-in-chief of the regional media (female, 46 years old, higher education, more than 20 year of professional experience) wrote to comment her survey answers: “Nowadays, so many information providers use journalistic formats and genres that our audience, for example, among the “news” and “interviews” or “success stories” offered by municipal informative publications can't always find arguments why independent and professional journalism is needed, what is the role of local media.”

In 2019, the MIL priorities had shifted somewhat. In response to the question about the most important MIL aspects for the *audience*, respondents indicated MIL for different groups of society (17), media role in a democracy (15), information literacy (13) and information accessibility (13). As unnecessary to the *audience*, MIL for children and

youth (0) and the related media education and MIL at school (1) were indicated, alongside the lesser important topics like health and environment (4) and visual literacy (4).

The most important MIL aspects for the *editorial* were the media role in a democracy (18), information accessibility (17), and understanding of media role and activity (16). Digital literacy for children and youth (0) and the related education and MIL at school (1) were regarded as unimportant. The health and environment aspects were rated equally low.

In 2020 survey the category of lies deconstruction and media literacy (28) and media critique (22) is important for different media, but it is less important for diaspora media and some local media in Latgale (Eastern part of Latvia) and Kurzeme (Western part of Latvia).

Results show that the media focuses on individual, albeit broad, aspects of MIL without regarding others. Media employees' views on media literacy do not include those aspects related to the strengthening of long-term MIL in the audience and systemic (systematic) measures to build and inform about MIL. In the opinion of the media, the audience is most interested in information literacy (skills to find, assess information, use appropriate tools and devices), but also in the role of MIL for different groups of society (the unemployed, elderly, poor, etc.), as well as the role of mass media, both in improving the awareness of media activity and in the role of the media in democracy and in building a civil society. This means that, in general, media workers focus on general topics about the role of the media in society and information literacy, while not considering that the audience is interested in a more detailed view of the various aspects of MIL, as well as the role of the state in promoting media literacy.

However, several important skills that are regarded important in the view of the media and audiences have not been implemented in the form of a project. Media representatives self-critically admit that they are not educated in the topical issues of contemporary communication (visual literacy, algorithms).

3.2. The content and framing analysis of MSF's- supported publications

In accordance with the number of confirmed projects, over the three years, content analysis of the media literacy topic was carried out on 111 publications and stories of which some were classified as lies deconstruction (21 in 2018, 12 in 2019, not

distinguished in 2020); some were intended as media literacy promotion (27 in 2018, 18 in 2019, not distinguished in 2020). In 2020, one category includes both media literacy and deconstruction of lies, a total of 24 publications; 9 publications were devoted to criticism of media (3 in 2019, 6 in 2020).

3.2.1. Main theme of publication

Generally, media link media literacy to political issues, including different security factors (21 in 2018, 12 in 2019). Few publications display societal issues, education, and school life. Even fewer are the publications that debunk esoteric approaches in the lies' deconstruction aspect.

Preventive science communication was not found at all, whereas medicine and health (3) and environmental protection (3) themes were scarcely covered and found only in the content published in 2020.

3.2.2. Information sources

Most often, media rely on statements by experts in the field, which usually forms the base of the publication or broadcast. The second most frequently used group of sources are media users, mostly the so-called vox populi collected in street interviews.

Though journalists themselves comment on media literacy rather frequently, these statements rarely take on the summative or conclusive function, mostly expressing their own opinion. There are very few publications involving research, documents, studies, or statistics.

For the expert role, state or municipal officials and parliament members are often chosen. The rather large proportion of the vox populi is comprised of interviews with residents about their habits of media use. The vox populi as a choice of expressing opinions, especially in 2020, raises concern about an extensive proportion of 'opinion journalism' in the media. For some issues that require knowledge and expertise, the self-driven use of street interviews increases the proportion of superficial and uninformed opinions in media content (more applicable to regional media content).

3.2.3. Positioning of MIL experts

As an expert, a media and communication specialist or representative is usually chosen (13 cases in 2018, 9 in 2019). Some employees of the media sector are introduced as

experts although it is not indicated whether their education is worthy of being called one (5 cases in 2019).

Compiling the data on positioning media experts, it can be observed that in 7 cases (2018 – 6; 2019 – 1) the expert is specialized in the issue, in 9 cases (2018 – 4; 2019 – 5) they have the education in the field and work in it. In four cases, the expert works in the field, but it is not indicated whether they have the appropriate education.

In one case (2019) the professional lacked the competence to speak as an expert, as well as professionals without the competence in the issue had been addressed (2 cases in 2019). In 2018, 18 stories without experts' comments were identified (2019 – 10).

3.2.4. Aim of publication

In their 2018 publications on media literacy, media mostly aim to educate the audience (35%). Almost all 2019 publications can be split in two groups according to the aim: materials that give important information (31%) and educate the audience (30%), but in publications of 2020, media have set several aims, regarding education and providing information to be of the same importance. The content also shows attempts to serve the MIL via means of entertainment or as a product of entertainment.

3.2.5. Attitude toward media literacy in the publication

The attitude of the media expressed in publications on media literacy is determined by the theme of publication: mostly the attitude is of support and concern (44% in 2018, 27% in 2019), or a combination of attitudes (35% in 2018, 27% in 2019).

When discussing or deconstructing disinformation, media publications express reproach and worry (17% in 2018, 27% in 2019). Some publications encourage looking at media literacy issues critically, offering positive and constructive solutions. The research data also contains media content units where the attitude toward media literacy is formal and uninterested.

3.2.6. Framing of MIL competencies

One of the vital aspects of media literacy is competency – the linking of knowledge to skills and the ability to use them. In 2018 publications media mostly try to explain and offer new skills (15), but the offer usually is limited to a description of existing practices (11). Media educate and provide new knowledge (9), warn of threats, and explain how to

evaluate and evade them (8), involve media literacy issues in an entertaining format (9). In 2019, however, media position the frame of education and providing new knowledge as the main task regarding MIL (13); there are still enough warnings and encouragements to evaluate and evade threats (9). The latter frame is especially prevalent in reflecting disinformation materials in Russian media. In difference from the previous year, media are concerned less with obtaining new skills (4), in some cases not offering them at all (5) or limiting the skills to descriptions of good practices.

3.2.7. Media literacy skills offered to audience

Regarding skills offered to the audience by the media, in the 2018 publications, the most frequent ones are a skilful evaluation of information sources (6), fact obtaining and selection skills (5), recognition of disinformation (5) and media quality (5). 11 publications combine several of those skills. 13 publications do not offer new skills in a way accessible to the audience.

In the 2019 publications, the basic skills of MIL are described less frequently: none of the analysed publications cover the evaluation of information sources, whereas the obtaining and selection of facts is not explained enough (2 cases). Recognition of media quality (2) and the concept of disinformation (1) have been presented in conjunction in several (9) publications.

3.2.8. Media quality criteria in the representation of media literacy

Explanation of media quality criteria is a vital part of media literacy. In the quantitative analysis of 2018 publications, it is observed that they talk about media ownership rights (5), the professional quality of headlines (4), sensationalized language (3) and professional approaches by the media (3); however, the explanations are sporadic. The mention of media ethics without broader explanation was observed in one case. In 2019, media encourage the public to be careful if message is sensationalized (7) and the headline does not correspond to the professional qualities (4).

3.2.9. Lies deconstruction

In 2018, the media mostly attempted to list true facts and sources (14). In 9 cases, the pointing out of untrue information by using clear terminology was observed, whereas correspondence between the presentation of the expert involved and their status was seen 8 times. In 3 of the analysed publications, an editorial summary or conclusion was found.

When debunking untrue news, the media mostly choose to seek the material in Russian-speaking media (48% in 2018, 89% in 2019), using the existing knowledge of the Russian propaganda and disinformation in the content of specific media. It is important to note that part of the ‘lies’ had been created by the media themselves to simulate samples of untrue information.

3.3. Interviews: MSF project implementers’ perspective

To interpret the content analysis data and survey results, interviews with the project implementers (8 interviews) and media experts or professional associations’ representatives (7 interviews) (Annex no 1).

To obtain a diverse perspective, the content of the project implementers and external experts’ interviews was partly different. Media representatives working on MSF supported MIL projects had the opportunity to self-reflect on the professional challenges of MIL representation, audience feedback and project conditions. The focus of the expert interviews was the interpretation of MIL understanding by journalists and the evaluation of the professional quality of the content created within the framework of MSF funded projects.

The interviewees regard the **media's role in accentuating the topic of MIL** as important, linking it to overall media quality.

“I have a question whether it is worth giving all these funds to publishers who clearly lack the capacity? For example, commercial radio which until now has only played music is trying out whether the audience is ready to listen to broadcasts.” (Journalist, TV host, personal communication, November 10, 2021).

Editors and other media employees are of the opinion that MIL must be integrated in journalism practice and editorial routine, even without separating it as a category or inventing/implementing it anew.

Media representatives highlight education and help in solving practical issues as **the main tasks of covering media literacy-related topics**.

“It is important [...] to debunk specific examples, show practically what lies are like.” (National press and internet platform representative, personal communication, September 12, 2020).

The interviewed representatives **define media literacy broadly**, including MIL basics.

“...understanding of the media, about what a journalist does and how to find criteria to evaluate media work and to understand what media are.” (Journalists’ union representative, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

In a bid to narrow down the definition, the interviewees link media literacy to critical thinking, which, in their opinion, is engraved during the study process.

“In my understanding, MIL is the ability to tell the wheat from the chaff. To be able to understand when you are being manipulated.” (National press representative, personal communication, October 28, 2019).

Media literacy as a media topic, according to journalists, would be in danger without the financial support.

“In regional media, topics of media literacy show up [...] sporadically. Serious publications appear only in the sponsored projects.” (Regional TV representative, personal communication, September 26, 2020).

“Without the project financing, materials on MIL would exist as there would be topicalities to write about [...] but it wouldn’t be as regular.” (National press and internet platform representative, personal communication, September 12, 2020).

As the **main problems in drawing attention to MIL**, media representatives are of contrary opinions about the coverage of MIL: some criticize the practice where the concept of MIL is rendered down to debunking disinformation with facts, whereas others are convinced that debunking disinformation is the best way to promote MIL.

Characterizing **journalists’ knowledge about MIL**, the interviewees’ opinions vary: some are of the opinion that the knowledge is insufficient and the media employees should restart or continue their education in the field, whereas others think that an adequate MIL level is a given with work in the media due to the first-hand experience.

“If it is not a journalist who has just finished university in communication science, then they must quickly complete a course.” (Journalists’ union representative, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Journalists also point to the problem they encounter themselves – the ability to speak about complex issues in simple and structured terms.

“Writing about media literacy issues, it is important not only to be well-versed in them but also to be able to explain them to the audience in simple, understandable language.” (Regional TV representative, personal communication, August 30, 2020).

“An analytical approach is a mandatory part of media literacy topics, otherwise, there are just samples that do not show the big picture and how and why fake news appear.” (National press and internet platform representative, personal communication, September 12, 2020).

Defining **professional problems that prevent from comprehensively covering MIL themes**, they are categorized as: (1) journalists’ knowledge and lack thereof, shortcomings; (2) the media literacy levels of the project implementer, its sufficiency/insufficiency; (3) the ability/inability to compile and analyse information; (4) editorial issues and limitations in the content coverage.

“It is a problem on a broader scale, and it causes serious problems to democracy. There are problems on both sides – on the media side and in the understanding of the audience.” (Journalists’ union representative, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

According to the media representatives, one of the solutions that could help with the issues is specialized training.

Media are acutely lacking **critique**. Media representatives comment on it abruptly, even sceptically.

“Banal, [but it is] a guild. There are relatively few of us, a closed circle, and we don’t want to argue amongst ourselves.” (National press representative, personal communication, October 28, 2020).

The interviewees claim that MSF’s resources should be an impulse to develop media critique instead of becoming the only base for media critique, as longevity is important.

“It would be good to find at least one platform where media critique is constant [...] If the finances were already put in the public media base budget and it can be counted on for five years ahead, then media critics would also emerge.” (Journalists’ union representative, personal communication, September 21, 2020).

3.4. Experts' perspective: MIL in the media content

A summary of expert observations over a three year period reveals few general trends. First, the experts admit the positive impact of media literacy content on the media discourse and accentuate the importance of quality content when strengthening media environment. Second, experts link journalist MIL skills with understanding of media ethics and point out to shortcomings of MIL project implementers in understanding of what MIL is, which leads to conclusion that there is a lack of self-criticism within media when evaluating editors' and journalists' understanding of complexity of MIL issues. Third, experts believe that various media platforms need to be used for MIL-focused content and, however, they observed the monotony in choosing MIL topics when media are regularly giving attention to the same ones while completely ignoring others, for instance, among MIL issues media criticism is almost non-existent.

Working with media literacy projects not only promotes the media literacy of the audience but strengthens the comprehension in the professional environment.

“People’s media literacy levels improve. It is partially the result of the MSF program.” (Expert no 1, personal communication, September 22, 2020).

Experts emphasize that high-quality local content is the only thing that can create a counterflow to disinformation; otherwise, the audience’s habits can change, and they will seek engaging content outside traditional media, possibly, in dubious informative spaces, experts warn. Media literacy projects that not only educate the audience to recognize disinformation but also talk about the role of a media system corresponding to democratic principles are needed, projects that explain why society needs high-quality media.

Media experts clearly **define and decode the notion of MIL** and indicate that media representatives view it in a narrowed manner, thereby preventing its interpretation from being engaging to the audience.

“Nowadays we must be able not only to read but to create. In contemporary understanding, illiterates are those who cannot use media technologies in a broader context.” (Expert no 2, personal communication, November 3, 2019).

“Media literacy is not only the skill to critically evaluate information, but it also includes the understanding of journalism culture, it is about the interaction between media and public relations.” (Expert no 3, personal communication, September 19, 2020).

Experts indicate that media are too focused on technical solutions, not the explanation behind why audiences tend to believe a certain piece.

“If all media literacy is focused only on how we will technically show you what to do, shame you for not being media literate, it won’t be very effective. But it is difficult to motivate to seek facts, to find out the truth.” (Expert no 3, personal communication, September 19, 2020).

In experts’ opinion, to successfully work with media literacy topics, media should be able to identify specific untrue beliefs among their audience.

“In my region, working with different audiences, whether they are teachers or students, or pupils, when I ask them whether they have seen content on mass media that is devoted to media literacy promotion, I see they haven’t, the society has not perceived it. It shows that the topic must be presented differently.” (Expert no 4, personal communication, November 11, 2021).

“People consume content in different ways, and it must be considered how content can be delivered to the widest possible audience, otherwise, this has no future.” (Expert no 5, personal communication, November 13, 2021).

To bring clarity regarding media work, there must be information about journalism quality criteria.

“Media professional ethics aspects also belong to media literacy questions, for example, if facts are not separated from opinions.” (Expert no 6, personal communication, September 8, 2020).

Commenting on the vast supply of debunking pieces regarding Russian media and the false information published by them, experts point to the convenience and values – it is convenient to talk about Russian propaganda, as relatively large support of the audience is expected.

Homogeneity of topics, especially in the category of lies deconstruction, is a factor that experts have pointed to for several years, alongside identifying topics that are acutely lacking.

“It should not be pointed out again and again that Russian media lie but be harsher against the so-called hybrid media here in Latvia. You cannot reduce everything to external propaganda!” (Expert no 3, personal communication, September 19, 2020).

Experts indicate that year after year, there are too few debunking’s on crucial topics like health, medicine, and economy.

In the **lies’ deconstruction** projects in regional media, local news is not covered, including seeking untruths in local politicians’ statements.

“Regional media are...mmm... rather kindly toward local politicians. I assume that on a national level it is easier to preserve civilized relationships even if a journalist turns against a politician on a regular basis.” (Expert no 2, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

Experts point to the too-convenient position of ‘debunking’ clickbait portal news and looking for ‘errors’ in self-produced stories.

Experts consider that the reason behind the lack of **media critique** and regular formats thereof is the lack of understanding of the role of media critique and types. It is understood as insulting colleagues’ work.

“The media themselves should develop a media critique department. It is needed for the industry. And it educates media users. It is not easy.” (Expert no 3, personal communication, September 19, 2020).

In the view of experts, the most important aspects in MSF-supported media literacy projects are that media literacy-related topics should be continuous instead of sporadic, as well as attention should be paid to journalism quality.

Alongside the trends recorded each year, there are also some specific observations.

Only in 2018 experts talk about overuse and misuse of term “fake news” in MIL-related media content recommending media to describe false information in more detailed form. Commenting on the quality of funded media projects’ content experts noticed that, rather than explaining to their audience the topics and questions related to MIL, projects’ implementers are dependent on the experts’ competences. Therefore, a part of commercial media journalists is not able to set their agenda and discuss MIL-focused topics themselves. Experts believe that there is a necessity to train the project

implementers in MIL issues preferably before the project begins. MIL problems can no longer be explained only with the help of random experience, therefore research data and scientifically based conclusions should play a greater role in media and communication journalism, as per experts.

In 2019, experts particularly emphasized that when an audience is being educated on MIL topics, media lacks explanations on how to notice content that is linked with commercial interests, thus, discussion on various forms of commercially biased and/or influenced content is absent within MIL-focused formats. They pointed out that a vast amount of PR related content is not being correctly marked as advertisement. Alongside that the experts also noticed that media insufficiently fulfills the explanatory/orienting function, which can be called “determination of truth”, as well as the lack of editorial policy regarding MIL representation, which results in allowing falsehoods to be shown on media platforms. Experts use the concept of the public sphere to mark the media's responsibility to the public and point to the risk of disconnection between media and audiences in the actual media ecosystem.

Even though in 2020, MIL itself was not separated out as a category, while speaking about the quality of content, experts mentioned that it's completely justified to demand the content creators of MSF funded project to be qualified professionals who are able to analyze disinformation effects and the other MIL-related issues.

When evaluating different yearly trends in the opinions of experts, a particular developmental dynamic can be observed in both the acquiring of new MIL skills in the media environment and the embodiment of MIL in the media created content beginning with the invitation to use accurate, well explained terms, and ending with growing expectations from the level of MIL knowledge of media professionals that work with MIL issues.

Conclusions and discussion

The main objective of our study was to evaluate MIL-issues related media content projects prioritized in Latvian media policy and funded by the Media Support Fund, analyzing them in the context of the ideological model of literacy and meta journalism approach. The general conclusion is that support for media and information literacy themes in the media is vital, without the regular external funding, the publications devoted

to MIL would likely lose their regularity and become a chance occurrence. An analysis of projects devoted to MIL shows the possibilities of state-supported journalism (Murschetz, 2019) to ensure diversity of content by strengthening media pluralism and economic sustainability.

While implementing MSF projects, media have undoubtedly contributed to the recognition of MIL topics. Thanks to the priorities defined by the MSF, MIL-related content projects became a regular part of the media agenda. Still, the analysis of media literacy projects shows crucial shortcomings in their quality: uniformity and superficiality in the understanding of the topic, ignoring important subjects, and evasion of covering complex questions. Media literacy is normally described as simple fact-checking or factual debunking of fake information (mostly using Russian media information as the target). It is framed mostly as an opportunity to obtain knowledge and overcome threats; we conceptualized it as the *educational* and *warning* frame. Media literacy-related content lacks long-term projects explaining the media sector and system, as well as the functions and role of media in a democratic society, science communication and other topics relevant to the society through the media literacy lens. We concluded that the topicality of MIL issues requires the improvement of literacy skills not only in general society, but it also calls for reassessment of journalistic professional ‘literacy’ skills, because the changes in the media ecosystem show that in practice “repair of media industry culture and normative boundaries” (Ferrucci, 2018, 4825) also takes place by redefining the relationship between media and their audiences. The complexity of MIL and the responsibility of media to provide a regular discussion on MIL issues no longer allow to perceive the professional experience of journalists and editors as sufficient for understanding all MIL aspects.

Media tend to frame media literacy as a necessity for society and link it to the responsibility of an individual, encouraging the acquisition of media literacy skills, and evaluation of their use of media and information sources. This frame reduces the understanding of media literacy, linking it primarily to media use but neglecting content perception and impact. Projects carried out by commercial media whose activity had so far not been linked to serious journalism (mostly entertainment radio channels) framed MIL *formally*. It means that the content of the project is superficial, describing basic issues, for example, repeating the question over and over – what is media literacy? The *formal frame* was criticized both on the receiving side of the project and by experts as it

reduced the value of MIL project content. On the one hand, MIL issues were addressed, but superficial and homogeneous projects did not contribute to media content pluralism and the improvement of the audience's MIL knowledge.

The media professionals involved in MSF-supported projects and media experts in Latvia perceive the necessary professional approaches as a part of the basic set of journalistic professional skills. The implementers of MSF projects confirmed that there is a widespread belief in the media environment that MIL, as an ability to critically analyze a message in its context and to identify factors that influence whether the message can be believed, is part of a set of professional skills for journalists and editors. The accentuation of MIL topic also leads to changes in the approach of journalists' work by restructuring content and improving their knowledge in the field of MIL. However, journalists do not always have sufficient resources for this purpose.

Individual MSF project makers offer analytical content about MIL, also providing audience representatives with examples of how to address today's media environment problems. However, a large part of the MIL-related project authors expects external sources to create deepened and engaging content for the audience. This means that, at an ideological level, media representatives are aware of the importance of MIL, but in practice do not always manage to overcome professional problems related to MIL topics by placing them in the context of ever-new phenomena.

The homogeneous framing of the MIL topic is caused by the priorities of the media agenda (topics that are not recognized as relevant in the survey are not included in the content) and professional routines. Experts associate the MIL-related content professional problems with media culture: the high impact of public relations on media content in Latvia, the lack of media critique traditions, and activities of instrumental media.

A homogeneous, normative-based instead of a topical approach-based representation of media literacy means that the traditional media literacy framework is no longer applicable to the contemporary media environment (Xiao, Su, & Lee, 2021), the complex and complicated nature of which is characterized by a high speed of information and unregulated flows of information that contribute to the spread and impact of disinformation. The new media literacy pays more attention to content creation and critical interaction with contemporary media content, but our research shows that in the framework of MSF, journalists do not offer the audience competencies useful in the era of 'new media literacy'. Therefore, our data illustrate the tendency that Steensen (2019)

warns about when writing that journalism is epistemologically challenged (Steensen, 2019, 187 – 188) if it does not look for new approaches, at the same time enhancing the ‘uncertainty’ status of journalism itself in an era when it is regarded as a construct.

Limitations

The limitations of our study are linked to the fact that the size and structure of the data are determined by the MSF evaluation projects rules and the content created by the MSF recipients, and consequently, the conclusions created cannot be generalized to the entire Latvian media environment.

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Annex no 1. List of experts interviewed.

Study ethics explanation: all interviewed experts provided informed consent on the objectives of study, structure, and content of interviews.

Anonymisation	Expert
Expert no 1.	Jānis Buholes, associate professor of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences
Expert no 2.	Ainārs Dimants, professor, "Turība University"
Expert no 3.	Sandra Murinska, Rēzekne Academy of Technology, assistant professor, director of study program "Regional media and communication"
Expert no 4.	Baiba Liepiņa, chair of the board of the Latvian Advertising Association
Expert no 5.	Andris Kēniņš, head of the Latvian Media Ethics Council
Expert no 6.	Kristers Plešakovs, Ministry of Culture, head of Media Policy Department
Expert no 7.	Arta Ģiga, Chair of the Board, Latvian Association of Journalists

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