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Implementing media literacy in the classroom

Abstract

Social networks use a variety of models from the spectrum of web technologies. These tools were designed for entertainment and communication purposes, and the most commonly used among students are the social media tools. Knowing this, teachers have incorporated traditional teaching strategies as part of increasing the ability of students to grasp the objectives. Considering that most students find social media tools interesting, most researchers have supported this strategy as one of the most innovative methods of improving the learning outcomes. Students today can learn almost everything on their own or with their teachers using the Internet, talk to people from all over the world, share experiences with their peers, get acquainted with the world and other people, customs and cultures through their own personal experience. Researching a particular topic to find information, literature by authors from around the world and literary criticism, there are things that can open their view of the world, as well as enable them to think critically and creatively. These are some of the most significant benefits of a global network. This study wants to indicate the level of awareness in teachers and students about the proper use of social media and media literacy as well as to address the necessity to overcome the lack of media literacy knowledge within youth as well as the wider population. It also focuses on pointing out the dangers that social media causes with illiterate youth. Students who daily take in a huge amount of information from a wide array of sources, are going to become better critical thinkers and smart consumers that recognize the point of view and recognize the author's goal. Hopefully in future, teachers will pay more attention to what extent and in what manner their students use social media and pay particular attention to teach them how to be more alert when using social media.

Keywords:
Education, media literacy, awareness

Media literacy – a must-have skill in the 21 century

Advances in information technology have transformed the way that users seek and use information. The exponential growth of the World Wide Web (Web) and its ubiquitous adoption as a vital information retrieval tool "is exerting power over the evolution and development of information-seeking behavior" (Nahl, 1998b: 157). Children are more persistent and motivated in seeking information over the Web than in using traditional and online sources (Bilal, 1998).

But the question is: Are children cognitively and effectively prepared to traverse Web space? Children's cognitive abilities (Siegler, 1991), developmental levels (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), and information needs (Walter, 1994) may impact their information-seeking behavior in IR systems. Use of the Web in schools and the increased access to the Web by children at home raise many issues concerning information-seeking and use, the roles of school librarians and teachers in educating and training, and how well designers of Web engines provide user-centered interfaces that facilitate children's information-seeking.

In 2001, Mark Prensky coined the term "digital natives", describing the new generations who grew up with computers and the Internet from an early age, distinguishing them from the older generations, or "digital immigrants" (digital immigrants). (Prensky, 2001). This expression marks the beginning of a long debate over Prensky's claims that generations born in the digital age think and process information differently from the "digital immigrants" and that fundamental changes in the education system are needed to meet the needs of the new generations (Bennet et al., 2008). However, something very important is often missed in this debate - the fact that a person born in the digital age does not automatically make them digitally literate. Digital literacy separates those who "can use technology in a creative, responsible and sophisticated way" (Mavridi & Xerri, 2020) from those who cannot.

Whether today's children think differently or not, the fact is that they have been active Internet users since the age of eight (Common Sense Media, 2013). The activities they do online are as diverse and almost as common as their offline activities, including socializing, learning and playing. These digital experiences can also be harmful to children (e.g., early exposure to sex, sexual harassment, online bullying, discriminatory behavior, etc.), but can also be useful (e.g., personal development, cooperation, digital citizenship, etc.). Although today's children are born in the digital age, many of them do not have the necessary skills to avoid risks and take advantage of the Internet (Livingstone, 2011). In that respect, only 2% of the children in the UK have the critical literacy skills to tell if a news story is real or fake. (Clark & Teravainen, 2017).

It is therefore crucial that government, business, schools and parents empower children born in the digital age so that they not only speak the "digital language" but also use it competently and critically.

"Modern, new and digital" means, prevailing on the Internet, are positioned on a fundamentally new type of temporal and spatial immanence - instantaneity, mobility, interactivity and multimedia focus. They complement the picture of multidimensionality and require a new type of literacy. There is an almost total mediation and dependence of many social processes and society as a whole on the new digital tools. This mediation is especially valid for today's knowledge society, in which the emergence of new mass media is a common phenomenon with complicating and, at the same time, facilitating effects. The processes of formation of new social communities and entities with virtual and extremely mobile character, the parallelization of the virtual and physical environment

and their unification into a common reality, reveal a different type of complication of society and its functioning. This new type of complication is accompanied by the digitalization of many of these processes and, at the same time, the facilitation of the compression of time and space, of accesses of different kinds, new forms of group and community solidarity.

The digital system as a set of old and new online media includes the whole range of media varieties - blogs, websites, etc. social media, including platforms, social networks, chats, forums. Based on the complexity of the issues discussed, the development of media literacy as an understanding, mastery and teaching - at different stages and ages - is a difficult process. Therefore, this paper includes the basic definitions that build the essence of (digital) media competence, and - traced along the path of their natural evolution. This program takes into account the requirements of the European Union in the field of digital education and citizenship, as key factors for upward individual development, and at the same time a guarantee for effective growth of the member states.

In addition to information and communication technologies, media literacy also focuses on the development of critical thinking and participation in public life through the media. To use the media appropriately, people need not just different technical skills (how to handle a variety of media platforms), but rather the ability to evaluate and analyze multiple sources of information simultaneously.

As media literacy is realized more and more through digital technologies, the term *digital media literacy* is also being used. In this sense, we consider digitally literate those who, in addition to being technologically literate, can engage and participate in every level of public life through their skills, from the use of social networks to the use of e-government.

Methods

The study is descriptive in nature and it attempts to indicate the level of awareness among teachers and students about the proper use of social media and media literacy. At the same time, it addresses the necessity to overcome the lack of media literacy within youth as well as the wider population. It also focuses on pointing out the perils that social media causes with the illiterate youth. The authors of this study believe that students who take in a huge amount of information daily from a wide array of sources and convenient amount of media literacy, are likely to become better critical thinkers, smart consumers that recognize the point of view and recognize the author's goal.

A pre-survey and an after-survey were conducted. The pre-survey occurred at the end of February and the beginning of March 2021. It addressed 120 teachers from primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia working with children from 10 to 15 years of age. It started with the question if they found media literacy a familiar concept. 73.5% of the interviewees stated that they were partially familiar with it, 22% claimed that they were clearly acquainted with the concept and only 3.5% admitted they knew nothing regarding media literacy. The second category had the opportunity to explain what exactly they knew via an open-ended question. Only 13% gave reasonable explanations unlike the rest 87% who claimed media literacy "refers to the personal literacy of the speakers on TV/radio".

These devastating results encouraged the creation of a brochure (a Manual for Media Literacy) and four educational videos, by the second half of March 2021, in order to help teachers implement media literacy in their classroom.

This study presents a combination of qualitative and quantitative study. The focus of qualitative research is to describe real life. The results of qualitative research give explanations for some phenomenon in a specific place and during a specific time. The study is based on primary data collected from two questionnaires as instruments for data collection from teachers, because they allow the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, offer anonymity, and allow respondents to answer the given questions at their own selected time.

The research procedures involved the identification of research problems, which comprises asking questions (i.e., the research questions) to be in line with the objectives of the study. The literature review assists the researcher to clarify the research problems, improve the methodology employed and contextualize the findings. Research designate strategy employed by the researcher in carrying out the study in a systematic manner as well as aiding in the proper planning of the instrument for data gathering. Analysing the data involves several procedures that are linked. The data is processed in parallel with the inspection of data, and finally, the findings and discussion are going to be produced.

The type of questions used are a combination of close- ended questions where the participants are asked to tick the appropriate answers, and open-ended questions where they are given the chance to provide their own answers or justifications. When it comes to the research methods in this paper, in addition to the theoretical analysis method, the analytical-descriptive method is used in processing the results obtained through the questionnaires.

Findings / identifying the needs - students and teachers (surveys and results - empirical)

Digitalization is transforming all aspects of society, everywhere around the world, not just work environments. In terms of educational contexts, this transformation is facing real challenges, regarding different aspects, such as: equipment, students' ability to be actively involved, teachers' skills and competencies, and of course teachers' and parents' will to positively accept and correspond to all the upcoming changes. "Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures," says Dr. Bruce D. Perry of Baylor College of Medicine. He believed that "it is very likely that our students' brains have physically changed – and are different from ours – as a result of how they grew up. But whether or not this is literally true, we can say with certainty that their thinking patterns have changed." When Prensky (2001) stated that "today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach", he was mainly addressing the education system in the United States.

However, the education system in the Republic of North Macedonia is not an exception, even more, during the last two decades it has been constantly exposed to different changes and modifications, either influenced by the examples of the Western countries, or, more or less, as an inevitable step in the global process of digitalization. Integration of technology into teaching and learning is not new, but the rapid rate and pace of technological advancement is a novelty, especially to the teachers, who mostly belong to the group of "digital immigrants" regarding the use of ICT and digital technologies, from computers to other more advanced forms of digital technologies. The transformative potential of digitalization in education is exciting and offers many opportunities and challenges. (Prensky, 2001).

Nevertheless, do all the actively involved participants in the education process, including the students, the parents and the teachers, as main "actors", share the same opinion on this topic?

The after-survey that was distributed in June 2021 among 130 teachers in the primary schools in North Macedonia showed a meagre improvement in implementing media literacy in the classroom. The first question gave the teachers the opportunity to state whether they were familiar with the basic principles of media literacy. 22.9% answered it affirmatively, 65.7% said that they were partially familiar with them and 11.4% showed no knowledge of the media literacy concepts. The second question inquired if it was important for each student individually to get acquainted with the principles of media literacy, especially now since they are all using social media. 88.6% of the teachers claimed it was of vital importance for students to be familiar with the media literacy basic concepts. 11.4% partially agreed and there were no negative answers.

The final question of the questionnaire was crucial to check if Macedonia teachers implement the notion of media literacy in the classroom. Thus, they were given a multiple-choice question: To which extend, a Media Literacy Manual would be useful in your classes? The answers offered were given as stated here: never (0%), I would use it once during the school year (5.7%), I would use it from time to time during the CCLs (Class Community Lessons) (34.3%) and I would use it several times a year during my classes, regardless of the school subject. Additionally, 95% claimed that their students were not aware of the importance of critical thinking regarding the use of social media.

Therefore, the authors of this study in collaboration with NGO "Callidus", Republic of North Macedonia, prepared a brochure for teachers, that was supposed to serve the purpose of a Media Literacy Manual. It consists of several useful parts.

The first part of the brochure for teachers entitled BE MEDIA SMART, provides the definition for MEDIA LITERACY as a sum of qualifications that enable mutual connection and interaction among people through communication and sharing information. These competencies facilitate proper communication, collaboration and active participation, giving and receiving within the social surrounding of communication and content sharing. It further explains that a media literate person creates their personality, worldview and way of social behavior, among other things, through tools for cooperation and information management, found on the Internet. Thus, you find information on your mobile phones and computer screens, in newspapers and magazines, visual messages can be seen on the billboards and heard on the radio. Those are mediated posts, and we are overwhelmed with them every day.

With so many standpoints, it is very difficult to separate fact from fiction. In order to be able to continue the survey of the media everywhere around us, the brochure has elaborated five basic concepts.

Concept 1:

All media messages are constructed. The texts in the media are "built" in the same way buildings and highways are built. The key standing behind this concept is to find out who has constructed the message, what kind of materials they've used and what the purpose of its "construction" was.

Concept 2:

Media messages are created by using creative language with its own rules. Each form of communication has its own language: scary music intensifies fear, up close cameras suggest intimacy, big titles signal meaning and significance. Understanding grammar, syntax and metaphor of media language helps us become less susceptible to media manipulation.

Concept 3:

Media has embedded values and standpoints. Since they are created, media messages carry subtext: who they are created for and what is important - at least to the person or people creating the message. The decision about age, sex or person's race, the choice of the ambient and the actions in the plot are just some of the ways for "embedding" the values in a TV show, movie or advertisement.

Concept 4:

Most of the media messages are created and organized for gaining profit and/or power. Great part of the world's media was developed as enterprises that earn money. Newspapers and magazines put their advertising pages first; the rest of the media space is dedicated to news. In a similar way, advertisements are an inevitable part of a TV program. Internet has now become an international platform through which groups or individuals try to convince other people.

Concept 5:

Different people react differently to the same media message. This concept is to show that audience plays a big role in the interpretation of media messages since each member of the audience has a unique life experience. The differences in age, sex, education and cultural education will generate unique interpretations.

Taking into consideration the basic concepts behind every media message, you are "equipping" yourself with the possibility to analyse and interpret the messages, that is to say, one either accepts or rejects its legitimacy.

This brochure further elaborates the ways how media literacy helps children:
In a few words it teaches them to:

- learn to think critically
- become smarter consumers of products and information
- recognize a standpoint
- create content responsibly
- identify the role of the media in our culture
- understand the purpose of the author

It also helps teachers understand that when they teach kids or students something more about media literacy, it is a two-way street, since there will be things that we are also going to learn from the younger generation.

Media literacy teaches us to be able to ask the proper questions and to support our viewpoints with examples. Following the key points for media literacy enables us to learn what and when has been published, why it has been published and most importantly, what is our opinion on that article, video etc.

Also, this brochure will explain that it is better if we incorporate the media literacy lessons into the existing curriculum with examples from the everyday activities, rather than having them in separate classes.

You can further divide the topics and lessons regarding the students' age and involving their interests and power of perception.

There are some crucial questions that need to be asked when teaching students about media literacy:

- Who created this? Is it a company or one person? If it is a person, is he/she a comedian, artist, anonymous source and why do they think like that?
- Why have they created/ published it? What is its purpose? What is it trying to convince them to do?
- Who is the message for? Is it for children, adults, girls, boys, people who have special interests etc.? And why do they think so?
- Which details have been omitted and why? Do they need more information in order to create a complete picture? And why do they think so?
- What feelings does the message evoke in them and whether all the other people are going to feel the same or some would have different standpoints? And why do they think so?

The brochure also suggests an interesting way to introduce media literacy to children through games and quizzes and here you can take a look at some of our interesting suggestions:

1. Become an Information Researcher

Our perceptions of the world are influenced by the music, television, and other media we consume. Children must develop media literacy abilities in order to enlighten consumers. These abilities include study and critical thinking. It suggests that libraries are excellent places to look for trustworthy information. Also, learning how to use the information they have gathered is a very useful skill.

2. Internland - River of Reality

Google's Be Internet Awesome Initiative, which strives to educate youngsters the "basics of digital citizenship," created this game. The top graph directs viewers to a river that is guarded by Fisher. Users are directed to http://www.vecteezy.com/members/treetypanda20 and should answer questions regarding phishing efforts to cross the river and complete the game.

3. NewsFeed's defenders

In today's chaotic climate, this new media literacy game teaches players how to detect and uncover disinformation.
- Identify signs for verification, transparency, accountability, and independence in the news by playing this game.
- Define and recognize problematic news and other sorts of news-related disinformation.
- Describe various methods for verifying photos and data.
- Check for bias in text using word choice and framing strategies.
- Use information from outside parties to assess the source's credibility.
- Assess the advantages and drawbacks of digital news and social media in the context of a democratic society.

4. e-Reporter

This game was created by the BBC in 2018 to assist children aged 11 to 18 in identifying false material on the internet. The "Choose Your Own Adventure" game puts players in the shoes of a BBC reporter, who must choose which social media posts, political statements and images to believe. There are also some pointers on how to recognize a fraudulent internet post.

5. Fakey

It is similar to the last one, but it is a lot of fun to play. Fakey is a game similar to e-Reporter that was developed by Indiana University's master. Simulate news on social media, with users debating whether to share, like, or fact-check posts. Users can earn points for sharing content from reputable news and news sources, as well as by checking dubious ones.

The brochure is an overall useful guide across the online labyrinth. Over 60% of the teachers claimed they would use the brochure during their CCL and 35% would include it in other subjects, as well.

Luckily with the recent changes of the English Language Curriculum (2021, 8th grade) in North Macedonia, media literacy has become one of the crucial topics together with critical thinking and IT in teaching foreign languages.

In addition to the informative brochure also in collaboration with "Callidus" four educational videos were prepared, each of them in favour of media literacy eligible for students from both primary and secondary school. In order to make young people more curious and sceptical about what they see and hear, recognizing tactics and approaches used by media makers, we decided to create videos teaching them how to do so. A short scenario and manuscript was created for all four videos by the authors with a slightly comic note.

Our first video was about the role of information i.e., recognizing Fake News. It's a short comic video starred by children age 10-16. This video addresses the necessity to overcome the lack of media literacy knowledge within youth as well as the wider population. It also focuses on pointing out of the dangers that social media causes with illiterate youth.

The second video - The role of information - recognizing Deep News - short comic video played by children age 10-16 about checking objective reliability of information by pointing the difference between digital natives and digital immigrants.
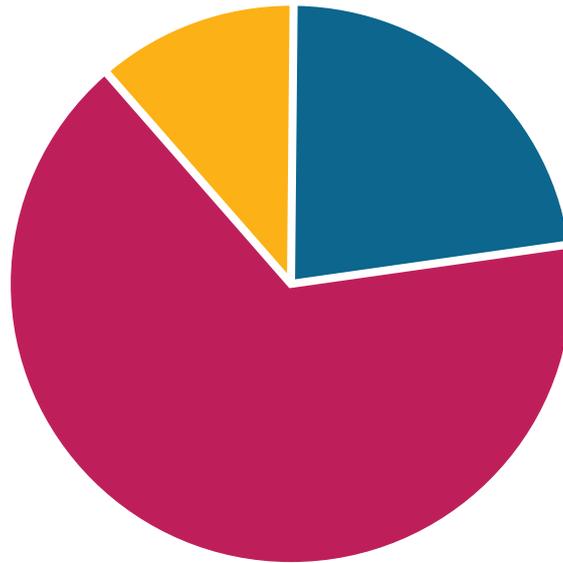
Third video- How to use CRAP test - short comic video played by children age 10-16 pointing out to the dangers of fake news and reliable sources, influencers and alike.

And the final video was created to address the cruel word of internet and what a simple post can do to people especially children.

Currently, all the videos, as well as the brochure, are available online.

After all this effort, the authors, via the after-survey, re-tested teachers to find out whether there was change in the education after providing materials for implementation of media literacy in the classroom especially in the EFL classroom. The first question from the survey "Have you had the opportunity to get acquainted with the principles of Media Literacy on social networks?" (see Chart 1) revealed that 65.7% of the respondent have heard about them, but they are only familiar with them. The percentage of the respondents who haven't read the principles of Media Literacy on social networks was 11.4%, and almost 30% of the respondents (the teachers) have familiarized themselves completely with the principles of Media Literacy on social networks. This is a great step forward on raising awareness in teachers about the importance of this topic.
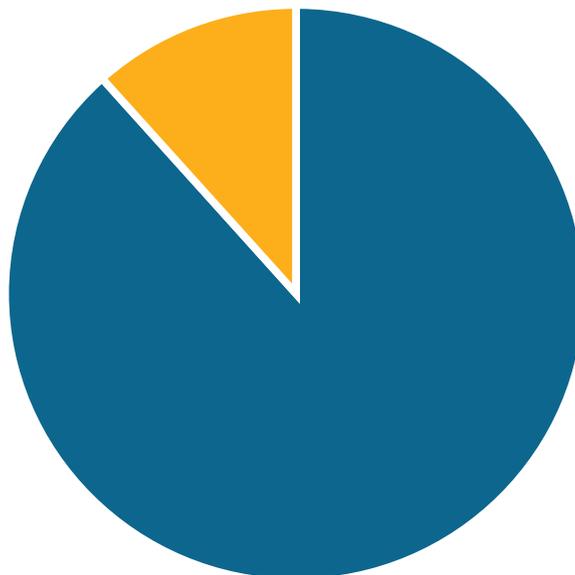
Chart 1

● Yes ● Partially ● No

In this testing we wanted to be sure that teachers are aware that it is not important only for them to be aware about the principles of Media literacy on social media but also to be aware of the importance of the students' awareness. In that order we decided to ask: Do you think that every student or general participant in social networks should know the principles of Media Literacy on social networks? (see Chart 2)
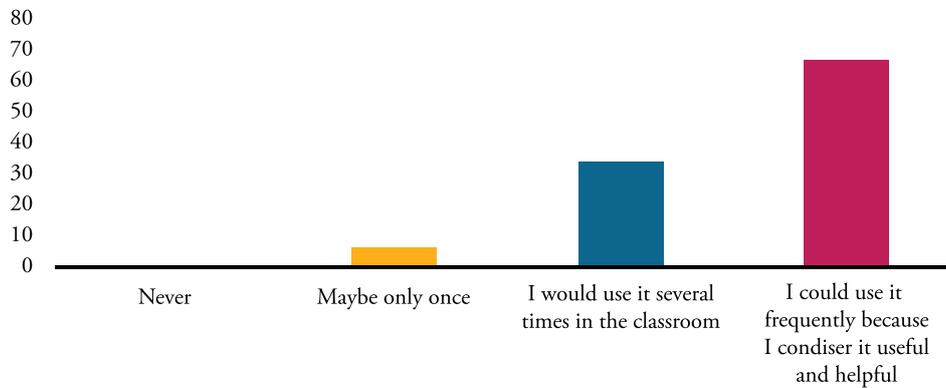
Chart 2

● Yes ● No ● Partially yes

This question showed that the awareness has been lifted to another level and gives us hope that teachers eventually will implement Media Literacy content within their lessons.

Chart 3

Another important question worth mentioning is If you have read the Media Literacy on Social Media Handbook, to what extent do you think it will be a useful guide to one of your classes? (see Chart 3) There were no negative responses considering this question i.e., 0% stated that they can't find a way to use it within their lessons. And the very surprising fact was that 67% of the respondents are eager to try and use the Media Literacy topic frequently during their lessons.

The final survey showed that almost 66.7% of the English language teachers revealed that they started feeling more confident in teaching media literacy and that it is more convenient and easier to implement it when having suitable and ready-made materials to use. Most of these materials were presented to the teachers during the online workshops organised by ELTAM MK, TOEFEL as well as Express Publishing Webinars from March to November 2021.

Discussion

Social media is an indispensable part of the lives of 21st century people, where they spend time mostly focused on entertainment and leisure with the goal of communicating with other people. Gathering the target group of people and the speed of communication provided by social media is conducive to the idea of using social media in education. Therefore, students must be aware of media literacy in order to be completely safe when using social media and teachers should make an effort to present all its aspects, especially the element of critical thinking as the most important part of the chain. Our students must start to think critically and be media literate.

After finalizing the conducted research and synthesizing its results by autumn 2021, it is evident that many students enjoy the use of social media in education. They state that the contents are so colourful and more vividly presented and that there is more interaction between students and teachers. This interaction can be accompanied by various tools such as quizzes, so students can learn from home. There are opinions that this is a good way to promote particular professors who can gain followers on social media due to the educational content they share not only with the group they teach within an educational institution, but also with a wider audience.

Media literacy provides processing skills and its teaching is different from teaching only factual knowledge. Media literacy provides a learning process - the research process - that can be applied to any content or thematic area. The five key concepts are the starting point, but require multiple applications to different media and content in different activities to master the process.

On the other hand, for many, social media is primarily a place of entertainment, so they find it difficult to accept the idea of their implementation in education. This is one of the most frequently mentioned reasons why social media are the divide or distraction rather than educational sources. Distraction could definitely hamper the students' learning skills. One of the other drawbacks mentioned at a global level is the availability of the Internet connection in certain parts of the world and the dependence of participants on this way of learning, so certain technical problems can significantly disrupt the course of teaching.

The modern educational system gives many perspectives for interaction between the classroom and the extracurricular activities. The pedagogical technology of training in a media club presented in the article, combining digital-media literacy and literary competence, is based on this possibility. The proposed technology is a response to the challenge for the modern literature teacher to successfully combine literary skills with digital media in the learning process. The model of work of the students in the media club provides an opportunity for the educational content of literature to be considered in a modern context and the technologies to be used fully, effectively and qualitatively.

Conclusions

The emergence of new media and social networks and their mass use, created a qualitatively new situation in human communication, thus in communication with adolescents, in particular. Society began to accept the world, guided by the models that are the product of the transformed world of the media. This situation has brought to the fore and strengthened the importance of media ecology, media education and media literacy, as the media space and the media involved have changed. Their nature, role and function have changed significantly. The need for media literacy has grown with the transformation of the media into a key factor for a better understanding of the processes in society and full participation in democratic and cultural changes in it. Children inhabit a world in which every aspect of their lives is mediated through technology: from health to education, from socializing to entertainment. Nevertheless, the recognition that children have different needs to those of adults has not yet been fully accepted in the online world.

There is well documented public concern about risks to children from the internet such as easy access to inappropriate content, loss of privacy, commercial exploitation and cyberbullying. The authors' inquiry sought to understand what issues and opportunities children face as they grow up surrounded by, and interacting with, internet technologies.

Becoming a critical user of media is a premise for citizenship in contemporary times. The use of critical thinking skills in mediatized scenarios demands developing the ability to interact with media, not only in being able to use devices, but also for understanding their socio-cultural effects. Our recent pandemic and political circumstances have raised our levels of awareness about fake news and biased media opinions. (Mateus, 2021)

By including media literacy in its English language curriculum (Ministry of Education of North Macedonia) is transparently supporting part of the European Charter for Media Literacy.

Curriculum development has long been a special art in the world of education. Engaging students, providing solid factual and subject information, and using effective teaching strategies that are at the same time aligned with state educational standards and assessments should be combined in lessons that inspire, complement and support learning. Not an easy task!

But today, technology is influencing curriculum development as well as other aspects of classroom practice, in some ways facilitating curriculum development - such as faster access to compelling information, photos or videos over the Internet - and at the same time, it is even more complicated, as the emphasis on the way time is spent in class inevitably changes due to the use of technological means by students and teachers. After all, time is the most valuable asset a teacher has with students, and allocating that time efficiently and effectively is more important than ever.

Since the emphasis is usually on content or subject knowledge, at the expense of information process teaching skills in classrooms, there is no solid and consistent basis for learning skills such as media literacy. However, advances in technology continue to impose new needs and requirements for teaching and learning, and the basics of how to teach media literacy and achieve the goal of educating students who are graduating to be media literate are still waiting for someone to deal with them.

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