

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on regional perspectives in developing media literacy and media education in EU educational policy

(2010/C 141/04)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- points out that in many cases, local and regional authorities are responsible for introducing media teaching at all levels of formal education. An appropriate procedure should therefore be sought to support local and regional authorities in backing media literacy projects.
- emphasises that Media literacy should be one of the areas covered in the new phase of EU cooperation on education launched by the strategic framework.
- highlights that a clear and substantive distinction must be made between the main components of media literacy, because the development of each component requires its own strategy, players and resources.
- wants to point out that consumers too need better awareness of what media use means. Greater respect for consumer rights is also essential in the media too.

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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the European Commission and for setting out not only why training policy is so important, but also its fundamental principles and objectives as per the definition of media literacy⁽¹⁾. It also took into account the opinion adopted by the CoR at its 8-9 October 2008 plenary session⁽²⁾.

2. The Committee of the Regions hopes that the European Commission will continue its efforts to pursue the consistent development of the media literacy policy launched in 2007. It urges the Commission, while in so doing, to incorporate the CoR's opinion with due regard for the subsidiarity principle and the specific remit of local and regional authorities. The CoR also calls on the Commission to continue to develop the media literacy action plan in cooperation with the other EU institutions, UNESCO, and the local and regional authorities. In so doing, it should take the following factors into account.

a) From the perspective of cultural policy, active participation of the EU public, and user awareness, the attainment of media literacy as a key policy objective must be vigorously pursued by all relevant parties and is primarily contingent on the promotion of innovations in education by all regions and Member States.

b) According to the EC treaty, responsibility for education and training policy lies exclusively with Member States, while the EU's role is to support the improvement of national systems where necessary through complementary EU-level tools, and exchange of information and good practice. This is something the European Commission also stresses in its 2008 communication entitled *An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training*⁽³⁾.

c) The strategic framework for education and training⁽⁴⁾ considers – questionably – media literacy to be a branch of digital competence, whereas it can play a crucial role in the implementation of many objectives and priorities mentioned in the strategic framework (such as basic

reading skills, learning-to-learn, active citizenship, fostering intercultural dialogue, and lifelong learning).

d) The strategic framework identifies the following immediate priorities⁽⁵⁾:

— the development of transversal key competences;

— measures facilitating the development of an innovation and creativity-friendly institutional environment underpinned by a critical and reasoned use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and improving the quality of teacher training;

— the establishment of partnerships between institutions and businesses that provide education and training, research institutions, cultural actors and creative industries.

These priorities are closely interlinked with considerations about media literacy development.

e) In many cases, local and regional authorities are responsible for introducing media teaching at all levels of formal education. An appropriate procedure should therefore be sought to support local and regional authorities in backing media literacy projects, programmes and charters, including the different partnerships between the large number of public- and private sector stakeholders involved and between cultural and educational institutions and professional content producers, all within the context of both formal and non-formal education and in strict compliance with legal provisions.

3. The Committee of the Regions therefore, calls for media literacy to be made the ninth key competence in the European reference framework for lifelong learning set out in Recommendation 2006/962/EC. There is no need to release major Community resources for this purpose, and this type of change to the key skills centre would greatly help the authorities responsible for formal education in the Member States and regions to take the necessary decisions to incorporate media literacy into curricula.

⁽¹⁾ In this area, the Commission has drawn on the European Parliament resolution on *Media literacy in a digital world*, adopted on 16 December 2008, 2008/2129(INI).

⁽²⁾ CdR 94/2008 fin on the Communication from the Commission on *A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment*.

⁽³⁾ COM(2008) 865 final.

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2008) 865 final.

⁽⁵⁾ COM(2008) 865 final.

4. The European Commission should make a clear distinction between Internet-assisted learning – online or e-learning – and moves to foster media literacy, in other words, the ability to assess the Internet critically as an online medium. It should be made clear that e-learning is not the same as media education and that ITC and digital skills are not the same as media literacy. The media literacy, has to enable people to play an active role and to maintain cultural diversity and regional and local identity (by creating new opportunities for people to voice their opinions, for example, and by giving those who are marginalised and minorities the chance to express themselves in the local public arena).

Basic premises

5. The CoR would point out that developing media literacy, combined with adapting teaching methods to the media in schools and beyond is particularly important for Europe's future. Adaptation will also involve promoting the teaching of new communication technologies, which are vitally important to social and professional integration.

6. Developing media literacy is a key aspect of protecting minors and young people and safeguarding human dignity in the media. Indeed it leads to an informed use of the media and the development of self-regulation and co-regulation within the content industry⁽¹⁾. Nevertheless, the improvement of media literacy can only complement national and supranational monitoring and the legal protection afforded to young people (in relation to the media). This skill brings citizens into the debate on the responsibility of all components of society, thereby fostering the emergence of active and media-literate citizenship. As such, it is vitally important to European cultural policy and the active participation of EU citizens. This is why we need to raise the profile of EU media education policy in all Member States and at all administrative and political levels.

7. Education for young people living in a media-saturated environment requires qualitatively new approaches that also take into consideration the different socio-cultural roles played by the media and schools in disseminating information and values. The teacher's role must reflect the fact that students are unconsciously socialised into a world of ready answers where simplistic media debates provide them with an interpretation for every issue. As a result, developing basic skills must also cover the interpretation of media content since developing a critical mind mainly concerns models presented by the media and ingrained since childhood, which unconsciously determine how we see the world.

8. When applying the open method of coordination to the definition of new indicators and benchmarks for teaching and training, the following points should be borne in mind.

a) Monitoring reading and comprehension should also cover these skills as they relate to media content, since in today's electronic and digital environment, these contents are presented in a combination of text, pictures and film.

b) When defining the benchmarks for evaluating the promotion of creativity and innovation, it should be borne in mind that involvement in projects aimed at developing creative content writing is a basic form of problem solving and team work.

9. One of the main reasons for current slow progress in media education is the fact that the link between media literacy and digital literacy in European educational practice has not been clearly established. In practical teaching, ICT is used mainly as a means of securing access to the digital world and promoting equal opportunities. Nowadays, young people do not have the slightest difficulty in acquiring the knowledge they need to use IT tools and basic software or to master simple applications. At the same time, teachers do not have – and have little time to develop – the necessary skills to give a critical interpretation of media content available in digital form (among others) and engage in creative production, albeit these are the key components essential to media literacy.

10. There is an urgent need to rethink the link between computer literacy and media literacy, to ensure that confusion in distinguishing these skills does not lead to shortcomings in the educational system. In addition to digital skills, young people must be helped to develop greater critical capacity and skill in relation to media content, so as to teach them to take account of concerns relating to security and to be aware of the need to respect people's private lives and of problems relating to data manipulation.

11. In consultations on media literacy education and training policy, the following factors are important:

— There needs to be greater transparency about the activities of expert groups and of those responsible for conducting the preparatory work, drafting proposals and taking decisions within the European Commission's directorates-general.

⁽¹⁾ The CoR would refer here to its opinion on the *Future of European regulatory audiovisual policy* (CdR 67/2004 fin) and its opinion on *A European agenda for culture in a globalising world* (CdR 172/2007 fin).

- Media literacy training policy must be based on a real understanding of the situation that also takes due account of regional viewpoints.
- The recommendations and action plans adopted should also mean something to the different (and differently minded) stakeholders involved in developing media literacy (governments, public authorities, regional and local authorities, content industry representatives, researchers, cultural and educational institutions, NGOs and civil society organisations). Their adoption should be backed by the necessary resource planning.

12. Media literacy should be one of the areas covered in the new phase of EU cooperation on education launched by the strategic framework.

Comments

13. While endorsing the European Parliament resolution, which emphasises that media literacy is an absolutely crucial skill for everyone living in an information and communication society ⁽¹⁾, the Committee of the Regions considers that the goal should be to achieve a society that has taken media literacy fully on board, and that media education is the way to attain this. It therefore notes that it is absolutely essential to ensure equal access to the Internet for all European citizens, especially those at a disadvantage because of geographical separation or remoteness.

14. A clear and substantive distinction must be made between the main components of media literacy, because the development of each component requires its own strategy, players and resources. It is therefore essential to:

- secure public access both to the requisite technology (including broadband Internet, electronic imaging and word-processing software) and to the European, national and local audiovisual heritage. Shared historical and cultural heritage must be accessible to the public in their native language, in line with the 2006 Riga declaration on e-inclusion and the CoR's recommendations on the subject ⁽²⁾;
- boost the skills needed to select appropriate media content and to, make informed, consistent choices, particularly on the Internet, in relation to information, media text and advertising that is impossible to verify in the absence of duly authorised and monitored webmasters (for example publishers, editors and critics);

- develop a critical view of the media industry and media production, paying particular attention to (i) ongoing research and the application of methods aimed at developing the skill of understanding audiovisual and non-linear content, (ii) the conclusions drawn from disciplines such as the economics, anthropology, sociology and psychology of the media in relation to their operating procedures and social role and (iii) the fundamental issues underpinning media regulation;

- develop the active and creative use, especially through project-based practical implementation, of the necessary technical and manual skills, actions and knowledge. The focus should be on audiovisual communication and on creating, presenting and broadcasting audiovisual content by means of digital technology;

- encourage participation in local public life, not least by raising awareness of issues relating to privacy protection, individuals' rights in respect of the processing of their personal data and the public interest;

- encourage the public to be more aware, when using media, about general issues of copyright, privacy and media law, as well as the criminal and civil law consequences of possible infractions;

- improve the public's ability to handle their personal data carefully on the Internet and, especially, make children and young people aware of the various sources of danger in the new media.

15. The CoR, whilst not questioning the crucial importance of the areas addressed by the EC when referring to the good practices (commercial communication, audiovisual production and online content), considers that it would be desirable to give these thematic priorities a substantive base in the upcoming recommendations. Otherwise, media literacy could, in practice, be confined to these three areas.

16. The development of skills such as intelligent information searching, critical content interpretation and creative Internet use may be expected to help protect minors and young people and secure respect for human dignity in the media. In tandem, therefore, with the regulatory provisions adopted by the public authorities, priority should be given to stepping up measures to boost media literacy in these areas.

17. Consumers too need better awareness of what media use means. Greater respect for consumer rights is also essential in the media too.

⁽¹⁾ 2008/2129 (INI).

⁽²⁾ CdR 5/2008 fin and CdR 252/2005 fin – opinion on digital inclusion and opinion on the theme i2010 – *A European Information Society for Growth and Employment*.

18. The Committee of the Regions wishes to emphasise that moves to foster critical media literacy will not, of themselves, be enough to eliminate the various detrimental aspects of content provision, such as gratuitous violence in the media, the breach of consumer rights by media services, the lack of authenticity and validity, and manipulation). Moreover, media literacy only has a limited or no influence on trends such as media convergence or the development of, access to and interlinking of digital archives, copyright reform, regulation in this field, and even online administration⁽¹⁾. Media literacy addresses these trends, puts them in context and prepares users to be citizens who are aware of what is produced in the public sphere and in the media. Regulation at the appropriate level, with due regard to the competencies and experience of local and regional authorities, is therefore necessary in addition to the development of media literacy.

19. Any future recommendations and action plans should make provision for schemes to foster the main elements of media literacy. These schemes should also be of practical use in Member States' education and training systems (including media education), taking due account of Member States' different educational and cultural traditions, the major disparities resulting from different types of training within the various regional set-ups and the provisions in place within each system to make economies of scale.

20. It is crucial, when drawing up recommendations and action plans, to take account of best practice; in this context the Committee would draw attention to its opinion⁽²⁾ in which it commends the stepping-up of Commission action aimed at harnessing the know-how acquired through local and regional programmes on media literacy issues throughout the EU by promoting platforms for dialogue, events and networks for exchanging best practice.

21. The Committee of the Regions wishes to express its concern, however, at the following aspects:

- since throughout the EU there is no monitoring taking place, there is no guarantee that good media literacy practices will be implemented;
- no provision is made to rank best practice in line with the main components of media literacy;
- the issue of a detailed critical assessment of the effectiveness of implementation has not been resolved;
- no database is available to foster the large-scale development, fine-tuning and deployment of best practice.

⁽¹⁾ On this point, the reader is referred to the CoR opinion entitled *i2010: Digital Libraries*, CdR 32/2006 fin.

⁽²⁾ CdR 94/2008 fin.

The appropriate organisational and professional infrastructure thus needs to be put in place: to this end, steps could, for instance, be taken to establish media literacy desks could be along the lines of the media desks in place under the MEDIA programme (alternatively, the scope of these existing desks could be extended), or to enhance or even expand the professional consultative remit of the media literacy group set up by the European Commission.

22. Whilst abiding by the subsidiarity principle and respecting their independence, the European Commission can help the Member States when necessary, to draw up their own national media literacy strategies, taking due account of the main elements involved; where possible, this should secure the involvement of the media regulation authorities, education policy decision-makers and representatives of local and regional authorities, civil society, the content industry and media literacy innovation in drawing up this national strategy.

23. Given the differing circumstances in the Member States and regions, media literacy under the relevant recommendations and action plans must be pursued in such a way that it can also be applied within the local socio-economic context. This will, however, require a more detailed study of the national and even the regional position in order to secure a clearer picture, not least as regards the motivation and practical stance of local authorities, the institutions' funding bodies and media literacy teachers.

24. Given the rapidly changing nature of the media environment, media literacy should be subject to ongoing research and assessment, involving authorities in the various Member States responsible for regulating audiovisual and electronic communication and fostering cooperation between them to improve media literacy.

25. The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to encourage the establishment of regional research and information departments, within the administrative structures of local and regional administrations, tasked with examining media literacy issues.

26. Local and regional authorities are the key players in fostering media literacy, since they are the closest to grassroots concerns, not least given their involvement in the organisation of many educational establishments, in running local media and other cultural institutions (such as libraries, community cultural centres, etc.) and managing European or other development funds. There are thus grounds for launching information campaigns aimed at the regions and local authorities, underpinned by EU recommendations and best practice, and for boosting opportunities for media literacy cooperation in the Euroregions and cross-border areas.

27. Local and regional authorities must be encouraged to support the media literacy projects, programmes and charters, primarily with the following aims in mind:

- a) a snapshot of the current position
 - an assessment of the actual state of play as regards media literacy, in the light of existing cooperation and partnership arrangements;
- b) networking, integration
 - a link-up of all players in a given area – the media industry (film, television, press, radio, Internet content suppliers and producers), media organisations, education systems, regulators, cultural and research institutes, social organisations;
- c) a more institutionalised approach
 - the establishment of public services and offices to foster media literacy;
- d) guidance and information
 - media literacy campaigns, support for media literacy desks operating at the regional level, in order to identify and disseminate best practice and provide public information;
- e) active participation, local representation
 - incentives, promotional policies, provision of tools, skills and media platforms to enable the public to generate media content, paying particular attention to disadvantaged social groups, minorities and people with a disability;
- f) cooperation
 - involvement in national and regional cooperation networks in the EU;
- g) dialogue
 - initiatives by public authorities to encourage the involvement of civil society organisations, a social broad debate on media literacy;
- h) regional education policy, regulating teaching
 - local and regional authority action to bring media literacy into all levels of formal education, incentives to secure the

incorporation of media literacy into the training of teachers and instructors and, as an integral part of curricula, into all levels of education and also in lifelong learning programmes;

- i) establishment of and support for partnerships
 - the establishment of media literacy partnerships between the content industry and teaching/training institutions as part of both formal and non-formal education and training (for example, cooperation projects between local media, businesses and teaching/training establishments, media literacy campaigns and festivals), making sure a close watch is kept on the nature of the involvement and the material interests of the media industry in organising this type of partnership, as well as on strict compliance with the legal framework in place.

28. The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to put the arrangements for funding training policy, supporting pilot projects and fostering research in the field of media literacy on a new footing, since media literacy can benefit from better funding under existing schemes (such as Comenius regional cooperation projects) or under future initiatives. As targeted and multicentre resources have to be available from the outset if the goals set are to be achieved, the Committee of the Regions agrees with the European Parliament⁽¹⁾ and considers that a media literacy sub-programme should be incorporated explicitly and in a targeted manner into other EU support programmes, especially the Comenius, *Education and lifelong learning*, *eTwinning* and *Safer Internet* schemes and European Social Funds programme.

29. Especially welcome is the fact that the European Commission has, with a view to long-term promotion, started to draw up media literacy indicators. At the same time, however, the Committee of the Regions hopes that these media literacy indicators will not simply provide figures on the form and duration of media use, since assessing media literacy also means working out ways of measuring an individual's skills (although in this area, a degree of scepticism about the use of figure-based indicators is understandable given the difficulty, in quantitative terms, of expressing creative and critical knowledge and the skills needed to 'rank' content in measurable yardsticks).

Brussels, 3 December 2009.

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of the Committee of the Regions*
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⁽¹⁾ 2008/2129 (INI).