

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION FOCUSED ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING AND MEDIA LITERACY: THE ROLE AND ACTIVITIES OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN SLOVAKIA

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This research study aims to examine the role and activities of key stakeholders in Slovakia who participate in non-formal education activities focused on the issue of critical thinking in relation to media communication. The aim was to



gain an overview of the ways and means by which these actors address their target groups and what conceptual approaches they use to increase the level of media literacy at the national level.

Methods. Framework analysis of secondary data on Slovak subjects whose non-formal educational activities and tools focus on the issue of critical thinking, disinformation and fake news by increasing the level of media and information literacy of various target groups.

Results. The analysis of secondary data showed that representatives of various stakeholders in Slovakia offer different categories of projects and activities to increase the level of media and information literacy of various target groups. The obtained results indicate that the most active providers of non-formal education activities are in the sector of non-governmental organisations and think tanks. Our analysis also aimed to examine what types of educational activities organisations provide. The most significant representation is static online content (various types of educational content available through the website).

Conclusions. The presented research results suggest that in terms of the position of key actors, the ways of their involvement in non-formal education processes are sufficiently diversified. They use a wide range of implementation concepts and models to develop critical thinking through non-formal learning methods for different target groups.

Key words: critical thinking, media literacy, media education, stakeholders, non-formal education, disinformation, fake news.

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy interventions and initiatives respond to current societal challenges and challenges facing individuals and public institutions in the face of growing disinformation and hybrid threats. Public policies aimed at developing different types of competencies (Grizzle et al, 2021; McDougall et al., 2018; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020; UNESCO, 2013; Zarestky & Ray, 2019) emphasize strengthening the capacity for critical thinking as one of the key tasks – especially in the context of paradigmatic changes in a global society. The media and information ecosystem are not only passive mediators of information content but an active part of a wide range of issues in a constantly changing world. Media literacy as a specific educational concept has the potential to mediate in-depth and multidisciplinary knowledge of the media sphere and selected aspects of mediated communication, as well as information and user environment and behaviour in the context of digitization of all sectors of social reality. Educational strategies aimed at developing students' ability to actively regulate and manage the ways of dealing with the media are based on the reflection of the media environment as a living space that shapes man in the context of transforming information and network society (Tkáčová et al., 2022).

Interventions and initiatives to address these challenges involve different actors and are implemented at different levels. They include measures

taken by the digital platforms themselves to block content that contravenes their rules and the various types of inappropriate content that fact-checkers or social network users themselves report. A restrictive approach to curbing disinformation content is also very noticeable in the relatively wide range of measures taken by public authorities at the European and national levels.

Raising the level of critical thinking and strengthening citizens' resilience to disinformation campaigns and hybrid threats is also an increasingly important challenge in the educational context. (Hladíková, 2018; Hossová, 2018). In addition to the school curriculum, a large number of organisations that are part of civil society have launched media literacy programmes and projects in order to assist children and young people in particular as they learn to navigate the online world (Edwards, et al. 2021). The key stakeholders and the educational agenda they come up with represent a specific ecosystem aimed primarily at strengthening the knowledge, skills and attitudes of learners. They include various structured learning approaches and initiatives as a part of non-formal learning. At the same time, this educational agenda aims at different target groups of citizens - from children and adolescents to adults and seniors to various professional groups, e.g. teachers and youth workers (Kobylarek et al., 2022).

This study focuses mainly on non-formal and lifelong learning activities driven by the ambition to contribute to the development of media literacy, with a particular emphasis on critical thinking in media communication. Depending on the national context and the needs of specific target groups, it can cover a range of programs that support different ways of integrating life skills and applying community-based learning models and active citizenship principles (Damesin et al., 2014; Rubenson, 2011). It covers different types of educational activities. Their providers come from various subsectors of public institutions, formal education, academia, and lifelong learning systems provided by different types of NGOs.

Participation in educational activities allows participants to keep up with ongoing changes and use the acquired knowledge and experience in the context of increasing opportunities in the labour market and active citizenship, public engagement, and solving authentic problems in individual, community, and social contexts. (Fischer, 2001; Pařa, 2017; Valavičienė et al., 2021). According to the *UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025)*, the global challenge is to ensure inclusive, equitable and quality lifelong learning provided in a broad, i.e., regardless of the participants' status, age, and educational attainment (UNESCO, 2020) Such a vision of educational practice should be continuous, cooperative, self-oriented, active, broadly focused, positively oriented and focused on developing the ability and applicability of learners, not only in the context of employability but also in public engagement. (Collins, 2009) and also "incorporate an ethical, psychological and legal context that we can find in our socio-cultural communication practice" (Gáliková Tolnaiová, 2021, p. 130).

Media literacy projects and educational initiatives should be based on the concept of cultural empowerment (Kellner & Share, 2005) and be built on “ethical, social and democratic foundations” (Gozálvez & Contreras-Pulido, 2014, p. 130) that enable citizens play an active role in an increasingly complicated media ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives, hypothesis and purpose of the research

This research aims to present the results of a survey of Slovak entities whose informal educational projects, activities, and online tools focus on the issue of critical thinking, disinformation, and fake news by increasing the level of media and information literacy.

In the first step, the analysis aims to identify critical factors and challenges related to the involvement of state and non-state actors in Slovakia in media education. In the second step, the analysis focuses on the characteristics and ways of involvement, which can be considered as examples of good practice of how individual actors address the current challenges of educational practice associated with the issue of critical thinking of different target groups.

The purpose of the research is to quantify and clarify how public and non-state actors are involved in this process. The framework analysis of the provided programs and projects offers a typology of involvement of individual stakeholders and identification of innovative elements that successfully address current challenges and contribute to the achievement and sustainability of educational and social goals.

Research questions

The following research questions were formed in the conducted study: (a) What types of actors in Slovakia have been involved in non-formal education focused on the issue of critical thinking, disinformation and fake news by increasing the level of media and information literacy of various target groups? (b) How are the individual actors in Slovakia involved in the provision of media education services, and how do their activities affect access, participation, quality and learning outcomes?

Research sample

The basis for the analysis consisted of published information and documentation on websites and platforms of various types of organizations ($n = 39$); special consideration was given to the characteristics of the objectives and the content of educational and methodological tools. The following types of content we included in the research sample:

- Courses, seminars and workshops;
- Static Online Content (website);
- Dynamic online content (Video);

- Interactive online tools (Gamification, IT solutions);
- Campaign.

Academic studies and research reports were not included in the research sample because we do not consider this type of output educational content intended for the target groups on which our research focuses. Likewise, the research sample did not include books and textbooks published only in printed form, as our research focuses only on educational courses, seminars, workshops, and freely available online resources. The collecting of data took place from January through May of 2022.

Method

Secondary data analysis (freely available information searched by Google search engine). The methodological approach of this study consists mainly of an overview of available online resources. We used an analysis of secondary data available as a search result through a Google search engine. We utilized the search terms “critical thinking,” “disinformation,” “fake news,” “media education,” “media literacy,” and “media competencies” as keywords during our search.

RESULTS

The analysis of non-formal education actors focused on critical thinking, disinformation, and fake news employed the method of document analysis. In total, 57 organizations were identified, of which 39 were included in the research sample. Organizations whose activities were not directly related to the research topic were excluded. Research data showed that the following types of stakeholders are involved in activities: NGO and Think Tanks ($n = 22$), organizations having the character of Public Authority ($n = 8$), Media Regulatory and Self-Regulatory Authority ($n = 2$), Academic Sector ($n = 4$) and Media Industry ($n = 3$).

The quantitative content analysis showed that the most active providers of non-formal learning activities are in the NGO and Think Tanks sector ($n = 22$). The surveyed sample included organizations that have the development of critical thinking as their primary activity, as well as organizations that also deal with other topics. The current social situation motivated them to expand their portfolio of educational programs and projects to increase media and information literacy (especially in the context of disinformation, fake news and hybrid threats). The analysis also identified the target groups on which these organizations focus their activities.

It is interesting to note that the most frequent projects are for teachers ($n = 46$) and youth ($n = 39$). We perceive this fact positively because it is the teachers who participate in lifelong learning that have the potential to multiply the acquired media and information competencies also within

the formal educational activities taking place in schools. Similarly, many youth leaders working in NGOs can use the acquired competencies in other non-formal education activities and online or offline communication with their peers. On the other hand, the data showed that minimal emphasis is placed on projects aimed at developing the critical thinking of the youngest and oldest generations. Of the total number of projects, only four focused on children and three projects on seniors. Of the total number of analyzed educational activities and projects ($n = 97$), projects provided by NGOs and Think Tanks ($n = 62$) and the Public Authority ($n = 12$) have the most significant representation.

Table 1

Non-formal education providers and their activities focused on the critical thinking in relation to media communication.

Category of organisation	Number of organizations	Number of educational activities
NGO and Think Tanks	22	62
Public Authorities	8	12
Media Regulatory and Auto Regulatory Authorities	2	3
Academic Sector	4	9
Media Industry	3	11

Source. Own research.

Part of our analysis examined what types of educational activities the organization provides. The largest representation is static online content ($n = 33$). Various types of educational content available through websites have been included in this category. The second most numerous categories were courses, seminars and workshops ($n = 30$). Due to the limitations associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, we have also included webinars and workshops in this group, which organizations normally provide in person, but have temporarily moved them to the online environment due to existing limitations. We have included dynamic online content ($n = 7$) in a separate category, including educational activities provided through a series of educational videos to increase media and information literacy. We included various types of content published on social networks, which were more informative than educational, in the Campaign category ($n = 18$).

A common feature of these activities is that their primary purpose is not to educate but to raise awareness among the general public or specific target groups about the need for critical thinking and threats regarding the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories, fake news, hate speech and the like. A very interesting and promising category of content is also interactive online tools ($n = 9$), which includes various activities and projects based on gamification principles (Encheva et al. 2020) and various IT Solu-

tions. An example is the online Checkbot tool, which aims to detect disinformation on Facebook. The user can send a link to a specific post via the Messenger communication tool, and Checkbot evaluates and informs the user whether it is misleading information or a fake message. In addition, gamification-based solutions are offered, for example, by the online game Interland created by the non-profit organization Management (2021) or by a board card game called Nekrm Kachnu! [Don't Feed the duck!] (Fakescape, 2022) which aims to increase young people's skills in verifying information.

Table 2

Categories of activities of non-formal education providers

Categories of activities	NGO/ Think Tanks	Public Authorities	Media Regulatory and Autoregulatory Authorities	Academic Sector	Media Industry
Course /Webinar /Workshop	23	5	0	2	0
Static Online Content (website)	18	4	1	5	5
Dynamic online content (Video)	5	1	0	0	1
Interactive online tools (Gamification, IT solutions)	6	0	1	2	0
Campaign	10	2	1	0	5

Source. Own research.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the presented research, we claim that in terms of the position of key actors, the ways of their involvement in non-formal education processes are sufficiently diversified. We tried to recognize the concepts used and understand what implementation models they use to develop critical thinking of target groups and identify the formal and organizational aspects they use in designing educational programs. The priority was quantitative-oriented analysis and the evaluation of data on providers of educational practice and the target groups on which they focus. We found that stakeholders in Slovakia provide a wide range of non-formal learning activities by integrating life skills and active citizenship, applying community-based learning approaches and models and using authentic examples from media and social practice. However, they are often associated with examples of disinformation and fake news on social networks and other parts of the current media ecosystem.

In particular, public authority organizations have a long tradition in life-long learning projects aimed primarily at teachers. These activities are not formally very innovative or diverse and are mostly limited to traditional seminars held in person or distance. However, such types of educational programs are also offered by a wide range of actors from NGOs and think tanks. In addition, some universities focus on media studies - especially those that have long been dedicated to the development of media literacy. Their target group is not exclusively primary and secondary school teachers, but they also offer workshops and other non-formal educational activities for adolescents and young people.

A limiting factor in media education is the finding that in the process of developing critical thinking and media literacy, faculties focused on training future teachers are incredibly passive. The reason for this situation is several, but the leading cause of the unfavourable problem can be described as insufficient expertise of academics from pedagogical faculties in media education. We can also illustrate this by the fact that it is impossible to study media education as a separate approbation subject at any pedagogical faculties. Teachers can make up for the low representation of these topics during their university studies by participating in lifelong learning activities, the offer of which is relatively broad in Slovakia. According to a survey of 150 primary and secondary schools in Slovakia, up to 74.7% of teachers are interested in participating in workshops and seminars (Hapčo & Čičová, 2020). Support from various non-formal education providers can help them improve, develop and deepen their knowledge, support their interest in personal development and improve their pedagogical and critical thinking and media education skills.

Ensuring that they are sufficiently attractive is also an essential part of offering non-formal learning opportunities. This factor is crucial for minors and youth, for whom traditional seminars or workshops are not engaging enough and often prefer individual learning through educational videos, gamification and other interactive solutions and dynamic online content. Various forms of social media campaigns, in which popular influencers are also involved, are also a good form that can bring the issue of critical thinking closer to children and young people. They can address the challenges of increasing media literacy in a very creative and informal way that is attractive enough for a generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001).

It is crucial to support the emphasis on partnerships and cooperation schemes between stakeholders to increase the effectiveness and impact of educational activities. Cooperation and participation in addressing current societal challenges are essential in the design, implementation and evaluation of public education policies, which should respect the interest and motivation of non-state actors (Balseira et al., 2016) in meeting educational needs. Particularly in the case of specific target groups (such as the elderly, minorities, the disabled, etc.), the role of non-state actors is crucial and often replaces the lack of supply from public authorities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paper was written under the project named „Critical Exploration of Media Related Risks and Opportunities for Deliberative Communication: Development Scenarios of the European Media Landscape“ (acronym MEDIADELCOM) within the European scheme HORIZON 2020 – Research and Innovation Framework Program.

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