Navigating the Media Landscape in the 21st Century

The Role of Critical Media Literacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Nejla Asimovic & Amie Scheerder

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Over the past years, the media space has expanded in reach, the number of users, and the amount of information individuals have access to. The endless boundaries of technology pose a new challenge to society, as users need to filter and process vast amounts of information with frequently blurred lines between facts and opinions. Moreover, political instability, social cleavages and economic insecurity are highly influential in shaping media content (Hodžić & Sokol, 2019). People are increasingly exposed to disinformation or dehumanizing and ethnonationalist narratives when they seek explanations and causes for the existing uncertainties (Markowitz, et al., 2021; Bassuener & Šabić, 2021). The (digital) media space demands new skills to reflect upon the different narratives that we are exposed to and mindfulness of how they are incorporated into our own thinking and behaviour. This is captured by the term "*digital media literacy"* – defined by Paul Gilster in 1997 as the "*ability to understand and use information in multiple formats, from different sources, and presented through computational means*" (Gilster, 1997) – which has gained widespread attention over the last decade.

While there is a lack of consensus on what types of skills this term encompasses, the importance of being able to navigate the ever-changing media ecosystem is widely acknowledged. Including but going beyond the digital world, building media literacy skills not only provides benefits to an individual, but can have a profound effect on the society. Data gathered by the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) clearly shows critical media literacy as one of the key factors in building resilience against ethnonationalism and strengthening positive citizenship instead (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020).

This paper centers around critical media literacy in exploring how individuals engage with media content and the challenges this can bring to social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The goal is to encourage a more productive and positive media ecosystem. In doing so, our aim is not to argue that media literacy is the only obstacle toward a more constructive media ecosystem – an increase in nationalist language in the media is best analyzed in light of political developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and structural challenges, analysis of which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

We do however hope to shed light on critical media literacy as a skill that can be particularly powerful in shaping individuals' ability to navigate the media landscape in a way that may yield more positive socio-political attitudes and behaviors.

Building upon the data from the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 (SCORE), this section analyses the relationship between information consumption and intergroup dynamics, and the role of critical media literacy in encouraging constructive citizenship (Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2020). SCORE BiH (2020) defines critical media literacy as "*the extent to which respondents are able to critically appraise information they are exposed to, reach evidence-based decisions and remain cautious of the techniques that media outlets may use to affect users' attention and their understanding of media messages*". Central to this skill is critical perspective-taking when consuming any type of media, both traditional (e.g., newspaper, TV, radio etc.) and online. Information consumption is measured as the frequency of usage of different sources to obtain information about current political and social affairs, including individuals' social networks, social media and television.

Figure 1: Multilayered interplay between critical media literacy and socio-political outcomes
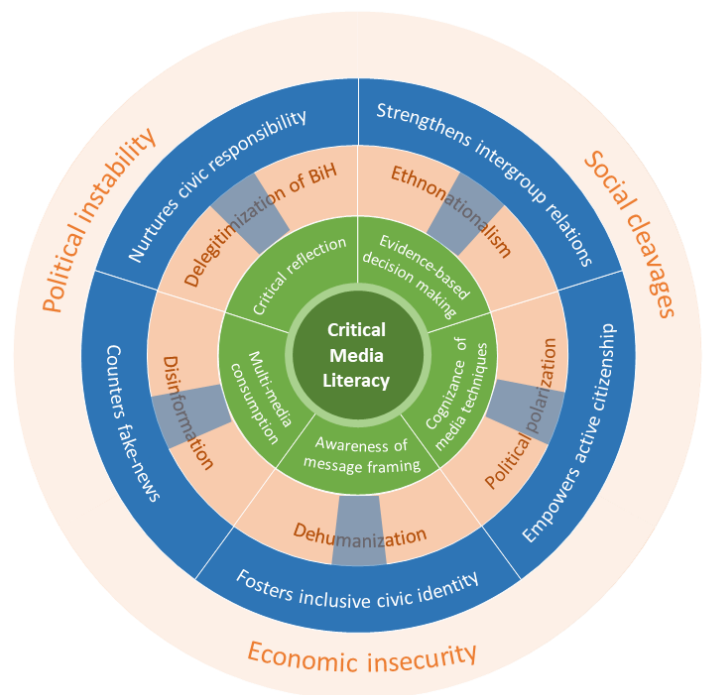
Civic attitudes and behavior are not only affected by the frequency of media consumption, but also by people's ability to critically reflect on the consumed information. Thus, it is important to disentangle the concept of information consumption in a way that goes beyond only focusing on the

frequency and diversity of information consumed but also considers the manner in which the information is processed.

The media plays an important role in the construction of meaning to social life and relations between constituent people, either stimulating social cohesion or further division. Concerningly, 40% of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina report being exposed to ethnonationalist narratives at least once a week through politicians and television (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020). The high consumption of information through both the media and the social networks is associated with lower levels of inclusive civic identity and higher levels of support for ethnonationalist ideologies (ibid). SCORE data reveals that critical media literacy appears to be a pivotal skill to counteract the radicalizing and polarizing effect of information consumption and exposure to ethnonationalist narratives (ibid). Indeed, those who report to reflect on, rather than simply consume information, also appear to possess a more inclusive civic identity, positive attitudes towards other ethnic groups, and active civic behavior (ibid). Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina identify both the conventional and the online media as sources of polarizing narratives (Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2020). Yet, the data also shows that exposure to polarizing narratives from daily-life networks (friends, family, work, school) can be powerful in increasing support for ethnonationalist ideologies (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020). This is not surprising given the plethora of academic research that shows that individuals are more likely to be influenced by those in their closest circles. Hence, developing critical media literacy skills needs to include not only reflection upon the diversity of sources of information one consumes but also potential biases that might be prevalent within one's personal network.

People living in ethnically homogenous areas tend to be particularly vulnerable to adopting more exclusionary attitudes. In that vein, SCORE data reveals that people residing in ethnically uniform areas with high critical media literacy perceive little tension with other groups whereas lower levels of critical media literacy is accompanied with higher perceived intergroup tension (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020). In addition to media literacy, the data shows that contact quantity with outgroups serves as a resilience factor protecting individuals from adopting ethnonationalist ideologies (ibid). This aligns with the so-called "contact hypothesis", which posits that intergroup contact (under a defined set of conditions) may positively affect intergroup relations by reducing prejudice (Allport, 1954). Therefore, media content may be particularly influential in shaping attitudes and behaviors within more homogenous areas where the opportunities for in-person communication across differing groups are limited to none. As the SCORE data suggests, one way to build resilience

against ethnonationalist content and towards constructive civic behavior may be by cultivating critical media literacy skills (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020).

Besides affecting intergroup relations and attitudes, critical media literacy contributes to citizens' positive civic behavior (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020). As already mentioned, high levels of information consumption are associated with less inclusive civic attitudes but more active civic behavior and stronger feelings of responsibility for social change in the country. SCORE BiH (2020), however, also suggests that more active citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina tend to be more exposed to ethnonationalist narratives and portray more violent citizenship tendencies (see SCORE, 2020 for full descriptions of the measures). In preventing activism from turning hostile, critical media literacy plays a crucial role as it strengthens positive activism, while nurturing an inclusive civic identity and less violent civic behavior (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020). This continues to hold even in the face of economic stress and limited access to civic spaces (ibid). Thus, interventions aiming to encourage reconciliatory and peaceful activism should incorporate activities cultivating critical media literacy skills.

How should such interventions be designed? Scholars have explored the potential of digital media literacy interventions to counter users' vulnerability to false news (Guess et al, 2020), analyzed the effect of "civic online reasoning" lessons on students' ability to evaluate the credibility of digital content (McGrew, 2019), and raised questions about measurement scales of different types of literacies (Jones-Jang et al, 2021). These interventions may also include raising awareness about the opportunities and challenges brought by online communication. More specifically, these challenges include the fact that online communication allows for the opportunity to connect with like-minded others which, at its best, serves a positive role of growing one's interpersonal ties and collaboration opportunities. At its worst, it is used to validate fringe or extremist beliefs. In a similar vein, near anonymity online allows users to voice opinions that they may otherwise not be comfortable expressing in an offline setting, which may produce more honest conversations, but it also may give space to the expressions of prejudice, hate speech and dangerous rhetoric. The empirical relationship between media literacy and ethnonationalism remains understudied, although the anecdotal evidence supports the empirical patterns identified in the SeeD data (Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2020). Given the pace with which the information ecosystem is changing, developing and scaling media literacy skills requires continuous efforts and adaptations. Doing so is challenging, which is why it must include but also go beyond educational institutions. To this date, the most comprehensive mapping of the media and information literacy efforts across the

Western Balkan region comes from a 2019 report by the Media and Civil Society Development Foundation "Mediacentar" (Petković, et al., 2019). They conclude – as is our assessment – that despite formal recognition of the importance of digital literacy, the level of concrete activities and investments remains low. The existing initiatives are largely led by civil society organizations yet remain constrained by limited capacity resources and lack of an institutionalized strategy to nurture critical digital media literacy and counter disinformation. In addition to integrating media literacy units into school curricula, there is a great role that non-governmental agencies, media outlets, tech companies and individuals themselves can play in supporting these efforts. This can include providing grants to libraries and community centers for offering free training courses, and other more unconventional strategies of incorporating media literacy into entertainment programming (RAND Corporation, 2019).

Finally, accessing reliable information is not only a demand, but also a supply challenge. The emphasis on developing digital literacy is not a supplement to the vital efforts to hold social media platforms and media outlets accountable for the quality and reliability of content they provide but should complement them. Platforms that serve as online watch dogs – such as analiziraj.ba, raskrinkavanje.ba – play an important role, and increasing their reach would contribute to raising awareness about the level of misinformation. Developing formalized standards that demand transparency from media outlets, tech platforms and journalists about their processes of obtaining information would also be a welcome step towards a more productive media ecosystem. As put by a media scholar, Sonia Livingston (2004), "*literacy, by extension, cannot be conceived solely as a feature of the user but must also be seen as medium-dependent, a co-production of the interactive engagement between technology and user*". She outlines challenges surrounding the efforts to increase media literacy (see Media@LSE blog), which include the high level of investment it requires, the challenges of reaching adults, the danger of exacerbating inequalities if media literacy resources are unequally provided, the issues of capacity or sustainability of literacy initiatives, and the frequent acts of "responsibilising" individuals where they are burdened or blamed for the problems of the digital environment even when that same environment is opaque or impossibly complex.

Identifying the challenges, as always, is the first step to overcoming them. Informed by these insights, we present a set of recommendations that revolve around three themes: limits and possibilities of individual responsibility, structural characteristics of the informational environment, and long-term sustainment of media literacy efforts. This is by no means an exhaustive list, yet we hope it is one that

contributes to getting closer to an environment where media serves the purpose it ought to.

Recommendations

Goal: Cultivating critical media literacy skills in individuals

Cultivating media literacy is an ever-evolving task given the fast pace with which the media environment continues to evolve and change. To keep up with these dynamic changes, interventions to strengthen people's media literacy skills need to be implemented by a variety of sectors and incorporated into individuals' daily lives. The main purpose of these interventions should be to equip individuals with cognitive, technical, and social skills that would enable them to critically evaluate the information they consume and responsibly produce content (Petković, et al., 2019). The latter may lead to a higher degree of perspective taking, empathy, and cooperation skills, importance of which is highlighted in the SCORE data that also identifies the crucial role that critical media literacy can play in mitigating the risk of adopting ethnonationalist ideologies (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020).

Building these skills can come in many forms. Within the education sector, this should include incorporating media literacy lessons into school curricula or, in the vein of existing efforts, training teachers to create an environment that empowers dialogue processes and reflective reading (Step by Step Center for Educational Initiatives, 2021). Civil society organizations may support this process in many ways, from capacity building to further programming around how to protect individuals from the exposure to harmful content (MFS-Emmaus, 2018). This may be particularly important for children and the youth, given the range of online activities that they engage in and the level of risk they might encounter doing so. Recent research has found that youth with a higher level of "online resilience" – defined as the ability to effectively deal with the negative situations they might come across online – protects their overall wellbeing that may otherwise be detrimentally affected by online risk exposure (Vissenberg and d'Haenens, 2020). While the authors focus on coping strategies (i.e., seeking help after an online risk experience, taking action such as blocking the sender versus neglecting the problem), building resilience may also include cultivating actual skills related to finding and evaluating information.

Cultivating critical media literacy through existing community structures and figures (e.g., religious leaders, social workers, the youth) could improve the effectiveness of training and programs. The UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport launched an "Online Media Literacy Strategy" which

capitalizes on community structures and trains community leaders in media literacy and media landscape awareness (Crown, 2021). In the Baltics, IREX (2021) teaches the youth to become leaders in media literacy enabling them to provide training to people in their surroundings.

Recently, UNESCO and the European Union have launched an exciting 36-month project titled "Social Media 4 Peace" (UNESCO, 2021). Financed with a €3 million investment and piloted in three countries (Indonesia, Kenya and Bosnia and Herzegovina), the ambitious goals of the project include media and information literacy training, and a set of online awareness-raising campaigns. Such campaigns may be particularly effective if they manage to reach individuals across demographics, providing best practices on how to evaluate the credibility of media sources, and the opportunities to test these skills in practice. In addition to this, the project is set to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the causes and the scale of online harmful content in the three countries, formation of initiatives to curb potentially harmful content online and the promotion of peace-building narratives through digital technologies and social media.

Goal: Improving the safety of (online) media ecosystem

A constructive media environment rests upon the regulations and codes of the field demanding transparency and accountability, allowing accessibility to a range of sources while minimizing the level of harmful content, and promoting responsible, diverse, and credible content creators. Previous interventions to improve the media environment tend to focus on transparency and accountability of media outlets, information asymmetries and efforts to counter harmful practices in the media (Petković, et al., 2019; Vijeće za štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, 2017). Raising awareness of media ownership, funding, and power relations (Petković, et al., 2019) that shape the domination of certain narratives (Kellner & Share, 2019) is also necessary in order to improve the health of the media environment. While it goes beyond the scope of this investigation to identify challenges surrounding the existing social media platforms (from the algorithms to the overall business models), there is a growing amount of such information that individuals, groups and organizations can use to counteract some of the more detrimental dynamics. One of the many possibilities may be creating more spaces where users with diverse viewpoints can engage with one another or access online content in a productive and safe manner. Indeed, healthy media ecosystems provide space for the plurality of media outlets to co-exist as well as space where constructive discussions can be held. Thus, the calls for more transparency from media organizations should be complemented by efforts to diversify the types of content provided.

There is an increasing number of civil society organizations within BiH that share the goal of improving the quality of the online media system. They include "Zašto ne (Why not)" which focuses on "promotion and establishment of political accountability mechanisms, strengthening and building civic activism, and the use of new media and technologies" (Zašto ne?, n.d.); Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN) providing investigative journalism related to crime and corruption (Center for Investigative Reporting, n.d.); Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, committed to exposing institutional and public wrongdoings through investigative journalism (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2017); and Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina which emerged as one of the key players in establishing ethical standards in online and print media, and promoting civic rights and transparency (Vijeće za štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, 2017). Finally, organizations such as Mediacenter Sarajevo (2019) provide training in media education and responsible journalism, while also producing research related to the media sphere. These initiatives reflect the engagement of various organizations in creating a safe media environment, yet there is a long way to go given the level of detrimental practices that are omnipresent in the media sphere, online and offline alike.

The public sector can play an important role in developing a national strategy and comprehensive policies tackling media transparency, accountability, and ethics. For example, the project "Building Trust in Media in Southeast Europe and Turkey" implemented by UNESCO and funded by the EU managed to successfully collaborate with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, of Bosnia and Herzegovina to set-up a national strategy cultivating media and information literacy, improving media outlets' capacity to counter disinformation, and strengthen media accountability (UNESCO, 2021).

Goal: Sustaining critical media literacy

Cultivating digital literacy requires a continuous effort on behalf of individuals, organizations and governments which is time and resource consuming, yet neglecting this issue is bound to provoke various negative long-term consequences. Interventions strengthening critical media literacy have received a considerable amount of interest including the allocation of funding for this purpose among international organizations and the EU (Council of Europe, 2021; UNESCO, 2021), an example of which is the earlier described "Social Media 4 Peace" initiative. Some improvements surrounding the government's engagement to foster critical media literacy and a safe environment can be

detected, though concrete policies remain absent (Vijeće za štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, 2017). There are also many – largely underutilized – opportunities to build bridges between institutions, civil society and international organizations that could allow for the strengthening of critical media literacy at a large scale. This would be prudent in terms of the financial efficiency as well: collaborative networks would allow for sharing of the expertise and resources, which may increase the effectiveness of the overall programming. One example of this may come in the form of regional reflection networks that would unite investigative research units which may collaborate on creating media content or informing practitioners on programming design. Including researchers in such networks would also be hugely beneficial, both in terms of monitoring effectiveness of programs surrounding critical media literacy and informing public discussions. Data-driven approaches may also inform which communities should be prioritized in building media literacy. For example, SCORE data suggests that possessing critical media literacy skills is correlated to non-violent engagement even for individuals facing economic stress or lacking access to spaces of civic engagement which are factors otherwise correlated with violent engagement (Guest, Machlouzarides, & Scheerder, 2020). As such, targeting efforts towards these communities (which can be further identified in terms of age, settlement, gender, employment and sub-culture) may prove to be particularly effective.

Finally, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges facing individuals in the ever-changing (digital) media ecosystem. Flexible strategies and innovative approaches will be required in order to increase and sustain higher levels of media literacy, and while not easy, doing so is necessary for building a robust and strong democratic society.

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