



Media and Information Literacy Project in the Republic of Moldova. Local Issues in the European and Global Context

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Abstract

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is a relatively new field. It is a response to the growing concern around the world to the increasingly complex media and information landscape, the changes in the way information is delivered by the media and consumed by people. This paper focuses on MIL actions taken by IREX Europe in the Republic of Moldova. IREX Europe is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Lyon, France, working to improve education, strengthen independent media, reduce conflict, and support democracy and human rights. Its project in Moldova – ‘Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy’ is a four-year project focusing on supporting independent media; Empower citizens to engage with new media technologies, traditional media, and journalists by developing and expanding media literacy and media corners in libraries across Moldova; and strengthen links between the media and their communities through open discussion platforms gathering journalists, civil society organizations, and local audiences.

Key words: media and information literacy, journalism, libraries, project management

1. THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION ERA

In the last decades of the 20th century, humanity was witnessing the passage into a new era – the age of mass media and communication. Many political, economic, sociological and philosophical questions have arisen as each area has been altered by the unprecedented access to and use of the media and the Internet for communication and collaboration.

Emails, chats, notifications, tweets, shares, and comments creates the daily news/media environment of each of u. Nowadays, there is a need to change the way we are addressing this issue. It seems to be more appropriate to talk about being exposed to information than to access information. Controlled and biased media, false news, propaganda, hate speech, radicalization, and extremism are present both in the mass media and in one's private life, especially with the expansion of social media. Moreover, with the help of the social media, people are becoming content creators. They are "not just a passive public acting as a spectator and occasional voting constituency" (Singh, Kerr, and Hamburger 2016, p.7) anymore. They have the tools to create, share and inform the world with simply a click. The dominant power of the contemporary world is its interdependence and interaction. The actions of certain people modify, to some extent, social environments, which in turn, transforms people's observations and representations. Seeing something, observation may create a concept, which may bring about an action. In other words, to act upon information is to act upon the world. Although after the pro-Brexit vote and election of Donald Trump for president of the United States, the social media started to develop tools to identify false or fake news. There is no other trustful and efficient 'filter' for what is true and what is biased, what is news and what is opinion, than people's' ability to discern, analyze and think critically.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is a relatively new field. It is a response to the growing concern around the world that is addressed by both the academia and government and development organizations and namely the increasingly complex media and information landscape, the changes in the way the information is delivered by the media and consumed by people.

MIL proves to be a potent tool, involving analysis, evaluation and media content creation. MIL prepares the individuals for their double role as producers and consumers of the news. As the independent MIL expert, Carol Lange¹ explains, "News literacy instruction emphasizes discerning the truth of information from mainstream media as well as from friends, family and even teachers." (Lange 2016, p. 146) It is a way to help the population to manage the information flow and analyze the news critically they access enabling them to make informed decisions. There are dozens of definitions of media and information literacy, each of them stressing one or another aspect of it. In general, when the terms *media* and *information literacy* are used.

It is about the knowledge, competencies and social practices involved in using, analyzing, evaluating and creating mass media, popular culture, and digital media. But media literacy also

¹ Carol Lange, Journalism Education Association's 2008 Carl Towley recipient and 1991 Dow Jones News Fund Journalism Teacher of the Year, was a developer of the Intensive Journalistic Writing approach to teaching composition and has directed IJW institutes since 1988.

invites a deeper exploration of important issues concerning how to heighten critical consciousness of message form, content, and context; the social nature of representation and interpretation; the dialectic of protection and empowerment; the role of art in the practice of civic activism; the changing nature of literacy; and learning as a means to engage the head, heart, hands, and spirit (Hobbs 2016).

2. ABOUT IREX EUROPE: GOALS AND FIELDS OF INTERVENTION

IREX Europe (<http://www.irex-europe.fr>) has developed a package of activities to promote media and information literacy that may be adapted to local circumstances. IREX Europe is committed to empowering citizens to engage critically with what they read and to increase their access to accurate and objective information.

These strategies are in line with the recommendations made in the European Endowment for Democracy's feasibility study (*Bringing Plurality and Balance to the Russian Language Media Space* 2015). However, the methodology has been successfully extended to other contexts and cultures. Our intervention is based on the ability to target local populations, to provide locally relevant training and content, to counter misinformation, to provide information on issues and themes otherwise not covered, and to promote critical thinking. IREX Europe's approach is flexible and can be adapted to the local environment. Where libraries are not available or suitable local civil society groups or local authorities can provide alternative sources for potential media literacy experts.

Our work in this area includes²:

- training of trainers to run MIL workshops in a range of environments, including libraries, universities, schools and community centers;
- creating 'Media Literacy Centres' in local libraries and empowering librarians to become MIL "champions" in their communities;
- reviewing MIL courses and curricula and providing expert consultancy;
- creating an online platform for MIL resources.

IREX Europe is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Lyon, France working to improve education, strengthen independent media, reduce conflict, and support democracy and human rights. The IREX Europe approach emphasizes partnerships with local development

² Extract from IREX Europe unpublished document. This information will be available on the new IREX Europe website currently under construction.

organizations and provides training and capacity building to create sustainable change. Besides MIL, IREX Europe implements projects in four other fields of intervention: Gender equality, Media Development, Human Rights, and Freedom of expression, working internationally to³:

- promote the rights of women and to combat discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons;
- strengthen local and independent media, aiming to improve the sustainability, quality, and accuracy of reporting. We have worked on numerous projects to enhance the role of the media as vectors for democratization and to support freedom of expression;
- promote fundamental rights in closed societies. We work with Human Rights Defenders to strengthen their capacity in the field, to strengthen local and international networking and to provide emergency support and legal support to victims of repression;
- provide assistance and capacity building to media organizations, journalists, media lawyers and civil society organizations (CSOs) focused on media freedom.

Among the types of support provided and types of actions implemented by IREX Europe are⁴:

- providing digital and/or physical protection and assistance to human rights and media organizations, informal groups, and activists;
- supporting artistic and cultural events to promote human rights and freedom of expression;
- travel funds to allow human rights defenders, journalists, media professionals, and lawyers to attend relevant events and training;
- creating an online legal resource for human rights lawyers and paralegals and providing rapid-response training;
- emergency funds to provide legal, financial or material aid to people at risk, facing unfair detention or prosecution;
- national and international campaigning on media freedom cases before the ECHR;
- assisting youth and community leaders at the grassroots level to strengthen community ties and facilitate dialogue, e.g., in post-conflict zones;
- running workshops to lead citizens and marginalized groups into peace and community building processes;
- peer-to-peer mentoring and international secondment activities;

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- core support to the media in closed countries etc.

3. IREX EUROPE'S MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY WORK IN MOLDOVA

One of the regions where IREX Europe conducts its intervention in the field of Media and Information Literacy is the Republic of Moldova.

The recent study conducted by Kamil Calus, Research Fellow, Department for Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, The Centre for Eastern Studies, perfectly depicts the picture of contemporary Moldova: “The Republic of Moldova is an exceptional state. (...) Twenty-five years on, the social and political project called the Republic of Moldova is experiencing a grave crisis. The Moldovan statehood remains fragile and seemingly impermanent. The country's successive governments have not been able to build effective state institutions or create adequate conditions for economic development, which could satisfy the basic needs of the country's people.” (Calus 2016, p.10)

The corruption is embedded in every sector of the state, in all the spheres of life including the media. According to a recent study on Pluralism of Mass Media in the Republic of Moldova (*Mass-media external pluralism in the Republic of Moldova* 2015), the media in Moldova remains unbalanced in political, cultural and geographical pluralism. The main television stations and online publications are concentrated in the hands of few politicians.

It is in this context that IREX Europe's Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy (SIMML) project has worked over the last nearly two years (Project dates: October 2014 – December 2018) to promote increased media literacy in Moldova and improve access to fair and unbiased information on critical national and international issues. The lack of a critical approach to the media and a lack of general media literacy leaves the population vulnerable to the influence of Moldovan and external media that seek to promote an anti-European reform and enlargement agenda, which has been exploited by corrupt leaders for their gains.

To achieve this goal, we have set up the following objectives that are guiding the activities described below (<http://www.irex-europe.fr/New-article,457.html>):

OB. 1. Improve the quality and quantity of media reports on social and political developments affecting Moldova.

IREX Europe is working closely with the following project partners: Association of Independent TV Journalists (ATT)⁵; Radio Free Europe⁶, Gagauz Media⁷; and OWH TV Studio⁸. Together we select and recruit journalism students and young journalists from different raions⁹ To join a learning-by-doing production process, from pre- to post-production (including the filming phase). The report topics focus on economic, social and political issues, including the national education system, corruption, international events that affect Moldova and many other countries. The principal focus is to interpret the facts in a way that ordinary people will understand and will relate to, producing balanced, well-researched stories that put the issues into a Moldovan context. Lately after broadcasts on national and local TV and social media, we have been encouraging and supporting trainees to organize public discussions.

OB.2. Empower citizens to engage with new media technologies, traditional media, and journalists by developing and expanding media literacy and media corners in libraries across Moldova, by supporting community's media initiatives. The programme centers around a Training of Trainers approach, building a pool of local media literacy experts who then go on to run regional media literacy workshops in their communities. IREX Europe has developed its Media Literacy manual, which has been translated into Russian and Romanian.

Building on the strong local community role of the Novateca¹⁰ the program, IREX Europe supports libraries to develop media corners in remote areas and train librarians in "how to run a media corner." The media corners give access to local, regional and national newspapers and magazines, and are equipped with computers and the Internet, allowing the librarians to

⁵ Ziarul de Garda is an independent investigative weekly newspaper, registered at the State Registration Chamber on March 22, 2004. The paper is a member of the Independent Press Association (API), and the API is affiliated with the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN IFRA). (<https://www.zdg.md/>)

⁶ Radio Europa Libera is the most popular international radio broadcaster in Moldova, with almost 90 percent of listeners crediting its programs with increasing their understanding of current events. (<https://www.europalibera.org/>)

⁷ GagauzMedia.md is an information portal of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), providing unbiased and accurate information about regional and national developments. It is focused on socio-political, economic, and cultural aspects. The portal was launched in 2014 and enabled to realize its goals with the financial support of the European Endowment for Democracy. (<http://gagauzmedia.md/>)

⁸ OWH Studio is a production house. Its objectives are: the realization of film and television production, and promotion on the national and international market, attracting and training young people in the audiovisual field by organizing various film workshops and promoting film culture in Moldova. (<http://www.owh.md/home.php>)

⁹ Moldovan administrative-territorial units.

¹⁰ Novateca is helping Moldovans attain a higher quality of life by increasing economic and social opportunities through access to relevant information and modern services in public libraries. Through a five-year national program, Novateca is providing Moldovan citizens with access to relevant information and modern, locally tailored services in public libraries to enrich their lives, drawing on technology tools and trained librarians who can guide them in this process. (<http://www.novateca.md/en/about>)

provide training and facilities to help local citizens access online information. The media corner is often used as a venue for the MIL activities organized by librarians.

OB. 3. Strengthen links between the media and their communities through open discussion platforms gathering journalists, civil society organizations, and local audiences. The aim here is to bring together communities for an active discussion on critical issues affecting Moldovan citizens. Our partner librarians with our support, organize and lead public discussions involving project journalists as well as local journalists, and local community leaders.

Some key results and impact to date of the SIMML project are summarised below (2nd Quarterly Report, April – June 2017, prepared by IREX Europe Project Manager):

OB.1.

- 26 journalists and journalism students are involved in the project activities;
- 30 video reports and eight radio reports were produced by June 2017;
- The trainees wrote and published 45 articles in both Romanian and Russian as a follow-up activity to the learning-by-doing training conducted in the leading local independent media.

OB. 2.

- 99 librarians attended media literacy training of trainers' sessions and gained the skills required to implement media and media literacy training and activities in their communities;
- So far, the librarians trained in 2015 and 2016 have implemented over 100 media literacy activities, reaching more than 1,600 people in 9 different regions. Activities included: workshops training, debates, and presentations;
- 13 media corners were set up by the end of December 2016. In 2017, eight libraries were selected to set up Media corners.

OB.3.

- 25 public platforms for discussion were organized in 16 regions, attended by over 540 people in total.

Based on IREX Europe's practical experience, its presence in the region and a thorough monitoring and evaluation plan the project proves to be successful and sustainable. By focussing on improving the quality and quantity of media reports, IREX Europe together with the partners support regional and young journalists to gain more experience through the learning-by-doing process within the leading national, independent media. This activity responds to the educational

system's gap between the theory and practice. Because of the lack of a practical aspect during the educational process, the young journalists find themselves completely unprepared for their chosen careers. There is an incongruence between the newsroom requirements and young journalists' skills and abilities. SIMML activities address this issues by offering an up to two months' internship during which the trainees take an active part in the newsroom activities, producing, with the support of the assigned mentor, reports and articles on current issues.

By building the capacities of librarians across rural Moldova, we target local communities entirely. The library is essential to the community, especially in remote areas. The expectation that libraries should be centered around a good choice of books, reading and learning have been altered grace to the rapid changes in media and information: quick and free access to the data of any kind, e-books, e-readers. Libraries have transformed the community's information center thanks to its internet connection, computers and newspapers "Libraries can offer themselves as gateways to other services. The egalitarian nature of libraries both as institutions and public spaces means they can be offered as a resource to other organizations who want to reach different user groups." (*What do the public want from the libraries. Practitioner guide* 2010. pp. 30-31) It adds cohesion to the village by organizing public discussions, training, screenings, round tables with local journalists, etc.

Trained librarians can impart media literacy on a long-term basis to their local communities by working within their regular librarian duties, leveraging existing infrastructure and infrastructure provided within Novateca and SIMML project. Trained librarians run media literacy programs targeting local librarians, local authorities, youth and anyone interested. Every year we enroll and teach new librarians in the media and information field, enabling them to share their knowledge and skills with the community. Some of them take the role of citizen journalist, writing and posting articles on local issues in the social media via Facebook pages of their library. Taking into the account the small dimension of Moldovan villages, where a trained librarian is present, the media and information literacy is well disseminated and absorbed. This way the librarians become the ambassadors of MIL across Moldovan villages.

The open platforms for discussion seek to activate the communities by engaging its members to take an active part in their communities' life. This activity is also oriented towards improving the image of the mass media and/or journalists by explaining the role of the media in everyday life and enforcing the basic rules to check the validity of the information.

Screening trainees' reports, followed by discussions of the problem presented/investigated in the report facilitated by the librarians, prove to be an efficient way to raise awareness and engage the population in problem-solving and decision making.

CONCLUSIONS

There are challenges encountered during the project implementation. However the feedback we get through surveys and direct observation as well as the visible changes in the citizens' behavior, motivate and encourage IREX Europe to continue and improve its intervention.

Every year new young journalists and journalism students conduct a learning-by-doing internship at a leading independent media in the country. For some of them this is their first experience of producing actual video reports, and during the last focus groups with IREX Europe project staff in Chisinau, they confirmed that the practical work had taught them more than an entire academic course. The most successful interns may have the chance to be hired by the media after the internship ends. This was the case of two interns in 2017.

The network of trained in MIL librarians is expanding, and thus the educated and empowered population is increasing as well. The Media Corners set up in remote areas become true community information centers. The public discussions on critical to the community subjects and the MIL activities held there inform, educate and empower citizens to become active in their communities.

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