

# Media and Information Literacy: A human rights-based approach in developing countries

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Media and Information Literacy (MIL), defined as the ability to access, analyze, and create media, is a prerequisite for citizens to realize their rights to freedom of information and expression. A rights-based approach is pursued to define MIL in general, and Digital Media and Information Literacy (DMIL) in particular. Different projects initiated by DW Akademie are drawn on to show the importance of the aspects of creation and engagement. They illustrate that various stakeholders need to be involved so that citizens can critically access, use, and participate in the flow of information on a broad scale.

## 1. Introduction

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in developing countries is a challenging field of media development today. It deals with the deep human need to communicate in a complex world that does not offer equal opportunities for everyone. MIL is about students in a school in Ramallah who, after discussing different news sources with their teacher, can more clearly differentiate between gossip and political news. It is about girls and boys in Kampala using their mobile phones as microphones, recording information on the growing pile of waste dumped in their neighborhood and airing it on a local radio station. And MIL is about young adults in Phnom Penh who spend their pocket money in cyber cafés. They have discovered the Internet as a place for the free exchange of opinions in a country where classic media are censored by the Information Ministry.

On a more fundamental level MIL – understood as an ability of individuals – is directly linked to the human rights to freedom of information, expression, and education, which are violated in many countries. Citizens cannot easily access relevant information and voice their concerns, and education levels are generally low. Media outlets often have to fear banning, repression, more subtle forms of persecution, or fall prey to bribery or co-option (Lublinski, Meuter and Nelson 2015, Levitsky and Way 2002, 53).

As a multitude of new digital channels and platforms come into play, new opportunities emerge, but so too do new inequalities and injustices. Not all people have access to these new media. Instead of solving this problem, many governments seek to engage in surveillance of their citizens through the Internet, as large enterprises also try to control the flow of information to further their commercial interests. Many people today struggle to cope with the multitude of options and pitfalls of the digital age. Instead of making active choices, they simply passively consume the entertainment products offered to them. Citizens need to find new ways to consciously participate in and shape the flow of information. In this context, new forms of Digital Media and Information Literacy (DMIL) are of particular importance.

Media development supports MIL projects because they help people make their own choices and realize their human rights. To achieve this, MIL projects may include training and skill-oriented workshops. But they need to work on other levels, too, and support structural reforms on behalf of informed and active citizens.

But what exactly is meant by Media and Information Literacy and how is it possible to advance projects beyond short-term workshops and bring about more sustainable change?

To approach these questions, this paper presents an overview and conceptual assessment of MIL in general, drawing from the literature as well as discussions and interviews with the project managers of pilot MIL projects started by DW Akademie in four different countries. These case studies are summarized in the information boxes below.

The results of this paper may contribute to improving and advancing MIL projects on behalf of people in developing countries. In order to put the lessons learned into context, we begin by discussing the relevance of Media and Information Literacy for media development.

## 2. Why is Media and Information Literacy (MIL) relevant?

The overwhelming majority of the estimated 650 million US dollars spent on global media development (Nelson and Susman-Peña 2014, 5) is still being invested in journalism and media capacity building. This, one could argue, makes good sense since media development is geared towards enhancing the scale and scope of information in these countries. On the other hand, what good is there in spending money on capacity building and media infrastructure if the population at large is unable to utilize media products to make informed decisions or to make their voices heard, which is what MIL is about? While one might argue that the television, radio, and newspaper audiences of the past were

predominantly passive consumers, this is not the case in a digital-media setting. So encouraging and developing skills for the effective use of (digital) media, both in terms of reception as well as in terms of making one's voice heard, is no longer a case of merely educating to consume. It is an empowering exercise.

And yet, MIL has been neglected by many media outlets (Stribbling and Scott 2008) in a large number of developing countries (UNESCO 2009). One of the reasons is that players in the field of media development still regard it as an adjunct to other development goals (Burgess 2013, 2), though definite progress has been made over the past decades (Mihailidis 2009; UNESCO 2013a). For instance, the Grünwald Declaration from the 1982 International Congress on Media Education was signed by only 19 countries, most of which were industrialized, Western states. Today, more than 300 organizations from all over the world are part of the Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL) founded in 2013, suggesting that MIL has gone from being mainly a concern of the North to being on the agenda of many developing countries as well. This progress may be primarily attributed to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) continual efforts to put MIL on the map of international politics (see box 1). Nevertheless the question still needs to be asked: What exactly is MIL? Before developing our own concept, we take a look at how MIL has been defined in the past.

### UNESCO's pioneering work: From user protection to user empowerment

UNESCO has played a pivotal role in developing an understanding of MIL at the international level. The Grünwald Declaration of 1982 assigned communication and media a key role in the process of development, emphasizing the function media have "as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society." While media education in the 1980s mainly emphasized the negative effects of the media and sought to protect citizens from its more harmful influences, the Toulouse conference of 1990 on "New Directions in Media Education" saw a paradigm shift from what the media do to people, to what people do with the media. Today, discussions on MIL include both critical and enabling perspectives.

Since then, UNESCO has intensified its commitment to the topic,<sup>1</sup> based on the conviction "that the cultivation of a media- and

information-literate population is essential for the sustainable development of society, requiring the individual person, community, and nation at large to obtain a diverse range of competencies" (UNESCO 2013b, 31). MIL is meant to include media and information access and retrieval skills, understanding and evaluating media, as well as creating and utilizing information and media products (UNESCO 2013b, 49). Importantly, UNESCO documents regard MIL as a composite of traditional media literacy, concerned with traditional media and journalism, and information literacy, focused on information retrieval and organization skills (UNESCO 2011, 18-19). The latter is especially pertinent in the wake of the large-scale diffusion of digital information and communication technologies over the course of the past two decades.

### 3. Aspects of MIL

MIL is the optimal outcome of media, information and communication technology (ICT) education. This begs the question, however, of what outcomes might specifically be regarded as MIL. Three options can be discerned in the literature: technical skills, critical attitudes, and facts about media and ICT.

**Technical skills** involve being able to access and use computers, mobile and other technical devices that offer media and information content. UNESCO's (2011, 31) MIL curriculum defines this aspect of MIL as "accessing information effectively and efficiently." It is important to stress that technical skills are an absolute prerequisite for being able to put MIL into practice. In many countries, MIL projects have to start with basic courses in Digital Media and Information Literacy. Only then are participants able to access and utilize these resources and only then does it make sense to convey knowledge about these resources and foster critical attitudes towards them.

**Content decoding skills** are important as the next step. They involve being able to deconstruct and analyze media messages (Mihailidis 2009, 7), but also knowing one's own information needs and being skilled at gratifying them (Groeben 2002, 17). Dieter Baacke has also included what he calls **media compositional skills** in his model of media competence. This involves creating new kinds of media content, encouraging self-determination, and increasing individuals' chances for participation (Baacke 1996, 113). So MIL decidedly involves a performative aspect, since literacy always entails **the competence to be able to do** rather than just to know certain things.

**Knowing facts** about media and ICT is the outcome perhaps most associated with traditional school and tertiary education, however. Writing for CIMA, Susan D. Moeller (2009, 7) has summarized this facet of MIL from the user perspective, arguing media consumers ought to be able to identify news, know how media decide what matters, and understand media's role in shaping global issues. Similarly, Norbert Groeben (2002, 17) has pointed out the importance of knowledge of the inner workings (contexts, routines, contents) and the effects of the media.

Fostering certain attitudes towards the media and other information sources involves both **being critical** of the possible negative effects of the media and a **readiness to positively defend the media** against possible sources of influence. The first aspect has played a major role in MIL concepts from the UK and the US. Len Masterman (2003, 25) has argued the aim of MIL should be critical autonomy, enabling "students to stand on their own two critical feet." Robert Ferguson (2001, 42), on the other hand, has emphasized "critical solidarity" as the main objective. "Media

education should be about recognizing the ways in which taking sides in relation to media representations has social consequences." Paul Mihailidis (2009, 7) has summarized the positive attitude towards the potential role of media as an "understanding of media's role in community, government, and civil society."

Media composition and participation in mediated public discourse have become increasingly important in the digital media landscape. This has specific implications for MIL, as shall be discussed next.

### 4. Digital Media and Information Literacy (DMIL): Towards a new participatory culture

"The proliferation of media technologies, the commercialization and globalization of media markets, the fragmentation of mass audiences and the rise of 'interactivity' are all fundamentally transforming young people's everyday experiences with media," writes David Buckingham (2003, 15). The new media have also seen a shift towards what Jenkins et al. (2007, 4) have termed "participatory culture," involving varying affiliations in social networks, collaborative forms of problem-solving and new forms of information circulation such as blogs. New media have the user adopt a more active, "lean-forward role" than in traditional "lean-back media" contexts. All these developments have led to a resurgence of the media literacy debate.

In order to actively take on this lean-forward role, citizens need Digital Media and Information Literacy (DMIL). DMIL can be defined as **a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance and improve engagement with digital media and information sources in a lean-forward, participatory manner.**<sup>2</sup> The potential for citizens to coordinate actions and contribute to the quantity and quality of information flow in society is where DMIL goes beyond traditional concepts of MIL. Furthermore, digital media ecologies are more complex in that they go beyond the one-way transmission of information of traditional media offerings. Online comments, forums, and especially social media are supplementing, and in some cases even supplanting the information monopoly of professional journalism.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO documents from recent years include a collection of media education policies worldwide (2009), an MIL teachers' curriculum (2011), a collection of information literacy resources worldwide (2013) and a global MIL assessment framework (2013). UNESCO gatherings that focused on MIL include the 2005 Alexandria, 2007 Paris, 2012 Moscow and 2013 Abuja conferences.

<sup>2</sup> Although the authors of this paper consider DMIL to be of importance, in the following the traditional term MIL is used and is understood to include new digital media and their implications as well.

## Case study

### Burundi **The media and me**

In Burundi's capital Bujumbura, a group of ten male and ten female participants between the ages of 15 and 19 from Lycée du Saint-Esprit secondary school have committed to taking part in weekly extracurricular MIL activities. The "Media Club" aims to strengthen the young students' media competence and to sharpen their critical attitude towards media in general. Activities include analyzing a survey on media use among young people in Burundi, learning about radio broadcasting, and actually making their own broadcasts. In learning how to create media products, the young people also reflect on their own media consumption. The participants, and local teachers who helped create the media club are all actively involved in the project, which is run by Dutch NGO and DW Akademie partner Free Press Unlimited. Importantly, the Ministry of Education was present at the kick-off ceremony for the Media Club, and has received continual updates on the club's progress. Currently, the upscaling of efforts in the field of "Media and Information Literacy in schools" is under discussion with the ministry. Apart from the pilot project, a competence center for media literacy is now in the making in close cooperation with the local media organization Maison de la Presse.

As such, DIML is setting new challenges for media education in developing countries. Governments are called upon to respect, defend, advance, and ethically frame freedom of opinion and expression on Internet-based platforms and to endorse new forms of education and digital cultures necessary for people to be able to gain technical access, assess sources, use public information, form opinions, and take part in public discourse on the various new platforms.

In this context, media freedom has a new connotation: It is no longer the case that only classic media can receive, verify, and make information publicly available. Today every individual along with networks of individuals can act as media. They can also contribute to a public sphere, put issues on the agenda, bridge gaps, and enable exchange between the different segments of society.

Issues of privacy also need to be reconsidered in the digital age. Another human right comes into play here: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home, or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation" (Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). In the digital age, citizens need to know about new ways in which states or other actors collect private information. And these citizens need to be enabled to take action when violations occur.

These new aspects of MIL combined with a human rights perspective of media development in addition to the lessons learned from MIL projects in several countries around the world have led us to develop the approach we outline in the following two chapters.

## 5. A human rights approach to Media Information Literacy

Human rights describe basic, internationally agreed upon standards that are essential for people to survive and live in dignity. They are inherent to the human individual, inalienable, and universal. This rights system is of fundamental relevance to the field of MIL. Both the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child include the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, the right to education, and the right to privacy. These enable the exchange and development of opinions and are a condition or an important basis for other rights, such as participation in public affairs and cultural life (UN 2011). A human rights approach to MIL must address three parties: the government, the individual citizen, and the media.

**The government is to be considered a duty-bearer.** It must respect the right to freedom of expression in all its aspects, including a free press; it must protect journalists as well as citizens from acts against freedom of expression; and it must implement the rights to education and freedom of expression, including freedom of information rights, in domestic legislation and by fostering free and independent media.

**Citizens themselves, in contrast, are human rights holders.** So the people are addressed as actors in their own right, which is where MIL enters the picture, since the media are important intermediaries. Journalists are rights holders with privileged access to media channels for information and opinion dissemination. Media users therefore have to be enabled to access and use journalists' reporting as sources of information and opinion formation, and they have to be sensitized to deficiencies of the media, but also to the demand for and the defense of quality media.

As a third party, **as intermediaries, the media have a vested interest in MIL** programs as well, since these not only help users make sense of media reporting, but can also help build

relationships of trust that the media depend upon. They can contribute to a public sphere and bridge gaps between different parts of society.

To sum up: From a human rights-based perspective, Media and Information Literacy is **a composite set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enables and empowers citizens to competently and critically engage with media and information, in order for them to increase their individual autonomy and collective solidarity in society.** It is both a duty of governments and a right of citizens. It is assumed that wide-scale MIL makes citizens expect that media and information sources will deliver content of technical, ethical and professional quality, thus acting as a catalyst for improvements in journalistic reporting, editorial organization and the media system as a whole.

## 6. Seven dimensions of MIL

Based on the considerations above, we identify MIL as empowering knowledge, skills, and attitudes in several distinct areas – which we term the **seven MIL competencies.** They do not only apply to traditional media, but also to ways in which social media are used to attain useful and relevant information.

1. **Accessing media and information:** technical skills for accessing suitable media and information sources
2. **Using media and information:** content decoding skills and responsible strategies for applying content to one's daily life
3. **Evaluating media and information:** ability to judge the credibility, accuracy and objectivity of sources
4. **Creating media and information:** critical attitude and skills in how to construct media and information
5. **Participating in media:** critical attitudes and knowledge of where and how to interact with journalists and editors of media, as well as with other citizens via old and new media
6. **Knowing how media work:** knowledge about media and information systems, organizations, routines and effects
7. **Demanding media quality and rights:** critical demand for and defense of good media and information sources

## Case study

### Cambodia Media Literacy project

In Cambodia's Kampong Cham and Svay Rieng provinces, 25 one-day workshops were conducted in 2014 with young Cambodians aged 16 to 20. The aim of the workshops was to improve participants' access to information, enable them to utilize media responsibly, and participate in public debates. Twelve young facilitators trained by DW Akademie conducted the workshops. The facilitators, who were already active and engaged in civil issues in their communities, administered the workshops in teams. In total, around 200 young people from provincial areas attended the workshops on topics like "Information and Media," "Social Media and Facebook," and "Photography and Photojournalism." The focus was mainly on digital media, and Facebook in particular, since most young Cambodians either use or are very eager to learn more about the social network platform. The educational materials and the assignments had to be adjusted to the local technical conditions, which sometimes included no electricity, no Internet, and no computers. In December 2014, a Cambodian Media Literacy Network was founded with the hope of establishing MIL as an educational topic. Additionally, DW Akademie will be involved in integrating MIL into the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education curriculum under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.

The seven competencies are from the perspective of media users, but governments are implicitly addressed as well. They are called upon as duty-bearers to create an environment in which citizens are able to not only acquire MIL, but also to put it into practice. This implies fostering a media system based on liberal and democratic principles and characterized by a diversity of information and opinion sources, as well as building educational capacities for MIL to be systematically conveyed.

Dedicated DMIL approaches can be developed in all seven dimensions. Elementary capacity building in the area of ICT may often be the initial focus. But other aspects of DMIL should be considered, too. If, for example, the use of mobile phone apps is taught as part of a new curriculum, then other aspects such as digital safety should be considered next.

## Case study

### Palestine **Speak up! Media Literacy for Palestinian youth**

Four boys' and four girls' schools in the West Bank are involved in this MIL project, with ten male or ten female pupils and two male or two female teachers from each school taking part. The pupils address and promote their concerns and their issues in morning radio shows and wall magazines. The daily morning radio editions are "broadcast" via the school intercom and the wall magazines are written on ordinary parcel paper mounted on a wall. This approach allows the project to be conducted at every school, regardless of a school's level of technical equipment. Moreover, additional skills are acquired in passing, such as identifying topics, researching information, and portraying it in a fashion that others find interesting. Participation in the projects has boosted students' self-esteem. As one female pupil put it, "If everyone at the schools reads and listens to what I write, that gives me confidence." Widespread access to the simple technical equipment needed means that the program is eligible for nationwide expansion. Programs for training MIL trainers have also been identified as a field requiring more attention in future.

## 7. Supporting development beneficiaries: Media creation and engagement with the media

DW Akademie has recently begun engaging in MIL, launching long-term projects in various developing countries. These projects are briefly described in the info boxes. The following explores some overarching approaches and the first lessons learned. The general aim of these projects has been to convey to the target groups, which comprise mostly children and adolescents, how to access, use, evaluate, create and participate in media. Thus far, the projects have mainly involved workshops, though the scope of the work is set to expand over the coming years and is aimed at bringing about long-term, sustainable change in the way people engage with media and information in the countries involved, such as by developing MIL curricula.

In the projects conducted thus far, **the creation of media and information** has often served as a catalyst for conveying knowledge, skills and attitudes connected to other competencies. So if people produce their own information and media content, this process also provides insight into how media products are created, and in how to access, evaluate, and make active use of information that goes into producing that content. Action- and project-oriented MIL work is dynamic and offers ample opportunities for reflecting on and engaging with the media, stimulating people to review their own media consumption habits.

Since most citizens are primarily users of media, MIL projects should focus on **enhancing peoples' skills for getting the information they need**, thus enabling them to competently engage (access, use, participate) with media and information. Media education can both provide people with strategies for retrieving information efficiently when they need it, as well as creating a space for testing media and information sources. Additionally, realistic forms of participation need to be thought through and put into practice without expecting ordinary people's output to rival that of professional journalists.

This last point is a reminder that the emphasis should be on the process rather than the end results. MIL programs should not seek to turn ordinary citizens into media professionals. Having fun, experimenting, teamwork, and small accomplishments on different levels along the way are important. The challenge is to constantly motivate the target groups by offering topics and activities of interest to them, especially when they are volunteers. All of this especially holds true when targeting less educated and rural segments of the population. Raising the bar for MIL too high might discourage many from taking part and should therefore be avoided.

While recruiting young people for workshops or training can be relatively straightforward, through schools or radio clubs for instance, adults are more elusive. Targeting educational and job training institutions is one possibility, community media is another, and offering incentives in the form of capacity building in modern digital technology represents a third. These approaches should, however, be treated as means to a more fundamental end, reminding target groups of their rights and that the state has certain obligations it is meant to fulfill.

## 8. Broadening the approach: the importance of partners and research for MIL

Organizing isolated workshops is not enough for longer-term development projects. But upscaling to the regional or even national level, for example, by developing curricula and integrating them in school syllabuses, is often only pos-

sible with support from local and international partners. Addressing local teachers and at the same time linking up with school administration and education ministries helps develop content and programs suited to individuals as well as the educational system. Working with university lecturers who educate future schoolteachers is another possibility that multiplies the effects. Establishing institutions such as competence centers that support MIL in schools might be another way forward. All of these are options being developed in various DW Akademie projects. In the future, it might also be sensible to cooperate with development organizations that focus on topics such as climate or health issues and link these with MIL.

Most MIL projects run today emphasize or focus on new digital media. Even authoritarian regimes often welcome DMIL projects because they see the importance of capacity building in new technologies. But a human rights-based approach in media development goes beyond technical training. It should take all seven dimensions of MIL into account. Specific answers to the new challenges of digital media need to be sought for each particular context in question. And citizens need not only to be able to access, use, and create new media; they should also be able to identify violations of their rights and know what corrective action to take.

If MIL is to have more than a small, local impact in a country, political authorities need to be contacted at different levels. Local partner organizations or action groups can be door-openers to decision-makers ranging from community leaders to educational ministers. They also know the local media best and can assist in identifying target groups for MIL education. In the long run, working with community media networks that involve citizens could also be considered.

As far as methods for MIL measurement are concerned, there is an ongoing search for appropriate evaluation tools. "Before and after" surveys are usually administered, but the short time span of workshops or high fluctuation of participants often renders these efforts futile. As projects grow in size though, it should be possible to see effects, e.g. the changes brought about through a new curriculum among teachers and their students. Meanwhile, evaluating the media products of non-professionals may be problematic, since MIL is more about the process of acquisition than about the end results. Amateur media and reporting will never be able to rival professional media. Instead, participatory assessments of a specific situation and any progress made may yield more information for improving a particular project. The search for appropriate evaluation methods is and should remain ongoing as MIL projects advance. As part of this process, the well-established human rights systems and principles can offer orientation in these new demand- and empowerment-oriented territories of media development in the digital age.

## Uganda **Let's talk about it**

A project supported by DW Akademie in Uganda gives young citizens the opportunity to speak up publicly, to raise their issues and voice their opinions on four radio stations located in the capital Kampala and the nearby city of Jinja. Although phone-in shows are popular in Uganda, young callers hardly ever make it on air. The innovative side of the project is its technical setup: The selected youngsters use ordinary phones and dial a special (toll-free) number that directs them to a server at the station. They can record their messages, reports, and even live interviews, and the material is edited and integrated into the shows by the producers. The young citizen reporters use their phones as microphones, the recorder is a remote computer equipped with special software. Besides the technical training, the young people were mentored at the radio stations and developed their capacities in journalism and ethics. Some participants also took part in regular parliamentary forums on media freedom organized by the Uganda Journalists Association and the Bonn-based development organisation, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The project has proved a success by bringing together young media users, journalists, local experts, and academics. Creating a stable technical setup remains a challenge due to issues with phone lines and software.

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