

PERCEIVED MEDIA LITERACY OF FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY IN LATVIA

Joseph Jack Horgan

Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (Latvia)

Abstract

In the present digital age where disinformation and manipulation are increasingly bigger problems worldwide, media literacy is widely considered a critical skill for citizens of well-functioning democracies. Following a series of reforms that were gradually introduced beginning with the 2020/2021 school year, media literacy skills are now included in the Latvian secondary education curriculum standards in the fields of language, civics and social studies, technology, and culture. The aim of this research is to determine the perceived media literacy skills of first year undergraduate students in Latvia who studied in secondary school following the implementation of these updated curriculum standards which explicitly include media literacy. 163 first year undergraduate students at a university in Latvia who had graduated from secondary school following the full implementation of the new curriculum standards participated in a survey that asked questions regarding media literacy. Students were asked to rate their abilities regarding four key media literacy skills mentioned in the Latvian secondary education curriculum standards. On average, students rated their ability to discern fake from real news most highly, followed by their ability to recognize whether a media content author is trying to manipulate them, and then their ability to find quality information sources for research. Overall, they rated their ability to recognize logical fallacies as the lowest of the four indicators. However, when asked to give specific examples of the different indicators, although nearly three fourths of students named a correct method to discern fake news, less than half were able to correctly identify a way to recognize manipulation, find quality sources, or recognize logical fallacies. Furthermore, certain students who rated themselves as “very confident” about some of the media literacy indicators either named incorrect methods or were unable to answer. The results show that despite the focus on media literacy in the new Latvian secondary school curriculum and a general level of confidence among the students, university educators should continue developing student media literacy.

Keywords: *Media literacy, secondary education, perception, education reform, higher education.*

1. Introduction

Despite having become a widely-used term since apparently being coined by Louis Forsdale in 1955 (Silverblatt, 2014, as cited in Carlsson, 2019), “media literacy” remains a difficult concept to accurately and definitively define. A study by Potter (2022) that analyzed 258 definitions of media literacy in 134 articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* found that while there is no single common understanding for exactly what media literacy entails, definitions most often consist of a mixture of skills that include “the ability to read, evaluate, analyze, imagine possibilities, deconstruct messages, recognize patterns, challenge meanings, judge credibility, decipher sender intent, counter-argue, dig for truth, avoid influence, and produce messages” (p. 41).

While Park, Kim and Park (2020) point out increased interest in media literacy and the related topics of information literacy and digital literacy since the beginning of the 21st century, according to Hobbs and Jensen (2009), the modern tradition of media literacy education in the United States of America began with the efforts of groups such as the short-lived Society for Visual Education founded in 1919, which sought to help educators teach students how to analyze the then-new medium of motion pictures. In response to a perceived increase in the use of by then widely-adopted radio to spread propaganda messages, the 1937-founded Institute for Propaganda Analysis brought journalists together with secondary and post-secondary level educators to develop material to help students detect, analyze, and resist such propaganda (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). As new forms of media have developed, media literacy education efforts have adapted to the changing technological and social landscape (Carlsson, 2019).

2. Media literacy in Latvia

In the Republic of Latvia, there has also been increased interest in the field of media literacy throughout the past decade. A “Media Literacy Database” established in 2023 by The National Electronic Mass Media Council, the state media regulator (Ministry of Culture, 2023), contains more than 220 research studies, books, articles, lectures, educational materials, and other works related to media literacy published in the Latvian language and/or related to Latvia. However, in The Media Index 2023, a report by the Open Society Institute – Sofia which rates European countries’ level of media literacy on a scale from 0-100 based on weighted aggregate data from relevant reports by various non-government organizations and the United Nations, Latvia scored 55/100 which was 15th out of 27 European Union countries (Lessenski, 2023). Although this was a slight improvement from a score of 54/100 in 2022 (Lessenski, 2022) and 53/100 in 2021 (Lessenski, 2021), there is clearly work to be done.

In 2018, the Latvian government approved new primary and secondary education curriculum standards as part of a sweeping reform known as “Skola2030” (Klūga & Krieviņš, 2018). Instead of curriculum standards for specific subjects, the system was reorganized into seven “fields,” including language (Latvian and foreign); social and civics; cultural understanding and self-expression in the arts (culture); science; mathematics; technology; and health and physical activity. In each field, there is a series of “learning outcomes” at different levels of complexity. For the level of secondary education (grades 10-12), the three levels are named “general,” “optimal,” and “highest.” For students to graduate from most secondary education programs, they must at a minimum complete courses that satisfy all of the learning outcomes at the “optimal” level and also take three courses at the “highest” level. The standards gradually came into effect beginning in September 2020, with the graduating class of 2023 being the first to experience all three years of the new standards at the secondary level.

One of the goals of the Skola2030 reform was to integrate media literacy concepts into the obligatory curriculum standards. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, learning outcomes related to media literacy were divided among the fields of language, social and civics, technology, and culture.

Table 1. Reformed Latvian education standards related to media literacy.

Field	Standard
Social and civics	S.O.1.3. Discusses and leads a discussion about justice, the rule of law, and contemporary ethical issues.
	S.O.2.3. Analyzes the media as an instrument of power to assess the influence of individuals and society.
	S.O.6.1. Compares a variety of information sources according to certain criteria, determines their reliability. Summarizes this information and draws conclusions. Uses information obtained from reliable sources for their own learning goals.
	•S.O.6.2. Distinguishes forms of scientific knowledge from scientific alternatives, critically evaluates sources, interprets facts, and generalizes theoretical foundations to obtain true information and create new knowledge.
	•S.O.6.3. Uses criteria and methods for checking falsified information, analyzes media content and distinguishes facts, recognizes manipulation and the most common logical fallacies.
	•S.O.6.4. Analyzes the communication of opinion leaders in virtual (digital) space and time to assess the impact of the chosen communication culture on social processes and individual habits.
	•S.O.6.5. Collaborates, acquiring skills to objectively analyze information in communication, forms deductive and inductive judgments, practically explores the importance of perception and evaluation skills in information processing.
Language	VL.O.2.2. Analyzes symbols, images, and verbal means of expression used to reflect events or opinions in various media. Chooses the most appropriate verbal and non-verbal means to create and enrich their texts, justifying this choice with rational and emotional arguments.
	VL.O.2.3. Analyzes language devices (words and their forms, metaphors, comparisons, grammatical constructions, punctuation) in media texts to identify the methods of influence and manipulation tools used in the text. Recognizes misleading perceptions and opinions in the text to determine the authenticity and reliability of information.
	VL.O.2.4. Responsibly, observing ethical norms, engages in communication situations, especially in social media, skillfully using language tools: words, phraseologisms, symbols, punctuation marks. Treats the views and beliefs of the communication partner favorably. Regulates his/her linguistic behavior in order to implement communication goals or change the course of communication if cultural norms of communication are violated.
	VL.O.3.3. Creates scientific style texts of certain genres, for example, oral reports, reports, summaries, reviews, observing the conditions for text creation and the choice of language means.
	•VL.O.3.3. Respects copyright and intellectual property rights by accurately citing authors and carefully citing sources.

Technology	T.A.2.2.4. Develops audio files (e.g. jingles, animation or video soundtracks, podcasts, etc.), digital graphic design solutions and videos (e.g. user manuals, advertisements, etc.) necessary for a design solution in an appropriate format and connects them, taking into account the planned communication strategy.
Culture	K.O.3.5. Studies the structure of the cultural field and creative organizations. Gets acquainted with specific professions in this field (exhibition curator, agent of a musical performer or writer, translator, cultural project manager, sound and lighting operator, video operator, director, producer, etc.), studying those working in the profession in person. Plans and organizes the course of their own creative project, cooperates in team building in accordance with the specifics of the chosen and familiarized art form.
	K.O.3.7. Evaluates the implementation of the goals of the creative project and the implementation process, including the impact of the chosen artistic means on the viewer or receiver of the creative work, the work process and the contribution of oneself or each group member to achieving the goal. Analyzes or models how this product will be perceived by others (for example, another generation, community, members of the regional culture).

(Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 416 of 3 September 2019 "Regulations on State General Secondary Education Standards and Sample General Secondary Education Programs")

3. Research design

This aim of this study was to determine the perceived media literacy skills of first year undergraduate students in Latvia who completed secondary school following the implementation of the updated curriculum standards. Since these students were able to achieve sufficient marks in all subjects in order to get accepted into university, they should theoretically have achieved each of the required learning outcomes of the curriculum standards.

The sample for this survey was 163 first year undergraduate students at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies who had graduated from secondary school following the full implementation of the new curriculum standards: either in the year 2023 or 2024. An online questionnaire was designed that asked students to rate their abilities from “very confident” to “not at all confident” regarding four key media literacy skills outlined in the secondary education optimal-level curriculum standards: distinguishing fake from real news, recognizing manipulation techniques, identifying logical fallacies, and evaluating the quality of information sources. Students were then asked to write a concrete example of each skill in order to compare their overall perceived level of media literacy with their actual media literacy abilities. The student responses for each of the open-ended questions were evaluated as “correct,” “partially correct” or “incorrect/empty” based on the accuracy of the responses.

The survey was conducted in October of 2024, with a small portion of class time being devoted by lecturers for students answering the questions in person. Questions and answers were written in the Latvian language, as that is both the sole state language of Latvia and the language of instruction that all classes are conducted in aside from “Professional English.”

4. Results

The results from the questions asking students to rate their confidence in four different media literacy skills are displayed in Table 2. Students were given a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident) with which they could rate their confidence for each of the mentioned media literacy skills.

Table 2. Percentage of students surveyed who reported feeling various levels of confidence regarding specific media literacy skills (n=163).

On a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident), how confident are you that you	5 (Very confident)	4	3	2	1 (Not at all confident)	No answer
can distinguish real news from fake news?	22.7%	50.9%	25.2%	1.2%	0%	0%
can recognize if a media content author is trying to manipulate you?	19.7%	41.7%	31.9%	5.5%	1.2%	0%
can recognize logical fallacies when they are used in media content?	13.5%	31.9%	39.3%	10.4%	3.1%	1.8%
can find quality information to use in your academic assignments, such as research essays, term papers, presentations, undergraduate thesis, etc.?	14.1%	41.7%	33.8%	8.6%	1.2%	0.6%

According to the results, students were most confident about their skills distinguishing fake news from real news, with 73.6% of students rating their abilities with “4” or “5.” The skills students were next most confident about was recognizing whether an author of media content was trying to manipulate them, with 61.4% choosing “4” or “5.” Next, 55.8% of students rated their confidence in being able to find quality sources of information as “4” or “5,” which is concerning given how important this skill is in their university studies. Finally, only 45.4% of students rated their confidence in recognizing logical fallacies when used in media content.

For each of the four skills, there was a follow-up question asking students to give a specific example. Answers were marked as “correct” if they were determined to be fully accurate, “partially correct” if they were overly vague or incomplete, and “incorrect or empty” if they were inaccurate or if no answer was given. The results for these questions can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Percentage of students surveyed who wrote correct, partially correct, incorrect, or no responses to questions about specific media literacy skills (n=163).

	Correct	Partially correct	Incorrect or empty
What is one way to check whether news is “real” or “fake?”	69.3%	20.9%	9.8%
What sign could you use to recognize that a content creator is trying to manipulate you?	55.8%	11.1%	33.1%
What is one example of a logical fallacy that you can commonly find in media content?	10.4%	12.3%	77.3%
What is one example of a criterion you can use to determine whether an information source is of sufficient quality to use in your academic assignments?	51.5%	20.9%	27.6%

For the question “what is one way to check whether news is ‘real’ or ‘fake?’” answers such as “compare the information with other sources” and “search for information about the publication” were marked as correct, answers such as “think logically” and “Google it” were marked as partially correct, and answers such as “I don’t know, I just feel it” and blank responses were marked as incorrect. In this case, the number of students who provided a correct answer was slightly lower than the amount who rated their confidence in distinguishing fake news as “4” or “5.” Nearly one third of the students who rated themselves as “5” for this skill provided an answer that was partially correct, incorrect, or empty, showing that some students are overly confident about their abilities.

For the question “what sign could you use to recognize that a content creator is trying to manipulate you?” answers such as “overly emotional language” and “trying to sell something” were marked as correct, answers such as “check the text again” or “know manipulation strategies” were marked as partially correct, and answers like “blocking” “I don’t understand the question” were marked as incorrect. While the 55.8% of students who provided a correct answer is only slightly lower than the amount who gave themselves a “4” or “5,” nearly a third of students who rated themselves as “5” had incorrect answers or no answers, showing a degree of disconnect between their perceived and demonstrated abilities.

For the question “what is one example of a logical fallacy that you can commonly find in media content?” answers such as “slippery slope” or “ad hominem” were marked as correct, answers such as “conflicting facts” or “exaggerated information” were marked as partially correct, and answers such as “grammatical mistakes” and “hate against others” were marked as incorrect. Only 10.4% of students were able to name a specific logical fallacy, with 12.3% being able to partially correctly describe one. Many students who answered incorrectly seemed to confuse spelling and grammar mistakes with logical fallacies. Of the 22 students who rated themselves with “5,” only three of them were able to name an actual fallacy. Although this was the category in which students were the least confident with their self-assessments, even this evaluation seems to have been significantly overly confident.

For the question “what is one example of a criterion you can use to determine whether an information source is of sufficient quality to use in your academic assignments?” answers such as “reputation of the author” and “peer reviewed” were marked as correct, answers such as “author” and “popularity” were marked as partially correct and answers such as “ask the professor” and “ask AI” were marked as incorrect. Just more than half of students were able to correctly name a criterion that could be used, with just over a fifth not being able to partially correctly identify a criteria and more than a fourth naming an incorrect criterion or leaving the answer blank. Only 14 out of 23 students who rated themselves with “5” in confidence for this skill were able to correctly name a criterion.

5. Discussion

Though it is commendable that media literacy curriculum standards have been implemented at the secondary education level in Latvia, the results of this very limited study suggest that there is still much work to be done. Although students might have been reluctant to write out answers for each of the questions asking for specific examples at the time of the survey, it is concerning that the overall confidence level of students in being able to distinguish fake from real news, recognize manipulation, identify logical fallacies, and evaluate sources is consistently higher than their demonstrated ability to do so. This suggests the presence of the Dunning-Kreuger effect (Kruger & Dunning 1999), which would be consistent with findings by Lyons et al. (2021) that three in four Americans overrate their abilities to identify false news.

In conclusion, additional research needs to be conducted to more effectively evaluate the results of the implementation of media standards in Latvia's secondary level education. Despite the implementation of the standards, it appears that many students still lack both media literacy skills and confidence in those skills. More work needs to be done to effectively teach media literacy at the secondary education level, and it could be suggested that additional media literacy is also taught at the post-secondary level in order to further strengthen these skills which have been identified as so important.

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