# MEDIA EDUCATION AND DIGITAL INCLUSION: TACKLING THE SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN EUROPE

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## Abstract

Media literacy has been one of the main strategies for promoting the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in Europe. These policies that favour empowering uses of media and information are based on the knowledge that it is not enough to guarantee access to ICTs. Cultural and social environments can say a lot about the uses of the media and how the information is used as a capital for personal and collective development and empowerment. Social exclusion is a multidimensional process. Following the European values that place knowledge at the heart of social and economic development, international institutions have focused on policies that promote social cohesion by favouring empowering personal uses of the media. In recent years, fighting the digital divide became less about access and more about its uses. The role of media and technology in the process of social development is not underestimated. They are seen as instruments for having citizens that are more active and participative. This paper analyses recommendations and proposals that address social inequalities in the European Union through the promotion of media literacy. This analysis shows that there is a consensus regarding the acquisition of skills that can promote critical thinking and offers a deeper understanding of the various dimensions that are favoured in the European context.

Keywords: media literacy, digital divide, digital inclusion, recommendations, policies.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social cohesion is an essential objective of the European Union and a shared democratic value in Europe. Disadvantaged citizens of Europe should be provided with tools, skills and competences to assess and understand society critically. In the context of lifelong learning, media education tools should be supportive of their reintegration.

In the context of digital and media literacy in Europe, the definition of 'disadvantaged groups' implies a relational observation at multidimensional perspectives [1]. The different socio-cultural and economic dynamics, accentuated by the policies in force in each country, reveal the practices of various social actors in different environments, characterised by cultural and geographical issues. Group culture is thus assumed to be the variable that best allows the isolation of an approach angle that integrates hetero and self-categorisations.

Mayer states that a disadvantaged group can be defined as having "denied access to the tools needed for self-sufficiency" [2]. A definition of 'disadvantaged group' can assume the socio-cultural, economic and political variables that each household faces in its country. However, the definition cannot ignore (inter) generational relationships, lack of digital capital, illiteracy, geographical factors, own personal / group conditions and circumstances (isolation, illness, disability, excluded from society and self-excluded, culturally / economically disadvantaged communities) ([1], [2]).

Drawing on recommendations and proposals oriented to policies and actions in the context of the European Union, this paper aims to identify and analyse European recommendations focused on disadvantaged groups that promote media literacy and digital inclusion by contending the digital divide.

### 1.1 Media Literacy

UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Union have been promoting public policies geared towards media education and critical and participatory citizenship [3]. In 1982, the Grünwald Declaration on Media Education emphasised the importance of media literacy as a way of critically questioning the media. The Grünwald Declaration on Media Education postulates that "rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as a fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's world. The role of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor the function of media as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society. Political and educational systems need

to recognise their obligations to promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communication". Several documents followed the Grünwald Declaration, as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. European Declarations. Source: MILOBS [4].*

| Year | Document | Organisation | Principles |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2002 | Seville Recommendation | UNESCO | - *Research platforms for policy-makers, agenda-setters, other researchers and the large public*;<br>- *Training for teachers and other practitioners, NGO trainers, teachers students*;<br>- *Media partnerships with schools, NGOs, other private or public institutions and actors*;<br>- *Networking for all practitioners and the general public*;<br>- *Consolidating and promoting the public sphere for all actors of civil society.* |
| 2003 | Prague Declaration Towards an Information Literate Society | UNESCO | - *Governments should develop strong interdisciplinary programs to promote Information Literacy nationwide as a necessary step in closing the digital divide through the creation of an information literate citizenry, an effective civil society and a competitive workforce*;<br>- *Information Literacy should be an integral part of Education for All, which can contribute critically to the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* |
| 2007 | Paris Agenda | UNESCO / Council of Europe | - *Development of comprehensive media education programs at all education levels*;<br>- *Teacher training and awareness raising of the other stakeholders in the social sphere*;<br>- *Research and its dissemination networks* [on media literacy]*;*<br>- *International cooperation in actions.* |
| 2010 | Declaration of Brussels | High Council for Media Education of the French Community of Belgium / French government / Council of Europe | - *Leading actions in favour of media education*;<br>- *Developing media competences in all citizens*;<br>- *Promoting the access of the citizen to media education*;<br>- *Developing research in media education and media literacy*;<br>- *Leading media education policies.* |
| 2011 | Braga Declaration | UNESCO / Portuguese government / Media Regulatory Authority / University of Minho | - *Foster networking by action organizations and programs*;<br>- *Establish partnerships at local, national and international levels between entities concerned with media education*;<br>- *Focus on strengthening the training and awareness of journalists*;<br>- *Further explore the link between media literacy and school curriculum.* |
| 2016 | Riga Recommendations on Media and Information Literacy in a Shifting Media and Information Landscape | UNESCO / Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy | - *To ensure that MIL programs and policy are developed as central to national and international policies designed to promote civic participation in democratic life by spreading information, knowledge, awareness and skills that will enable people to enjoy the benefits of the new communications environment*;<br>- *To increase engagement in policy making, training, capacity building, and evaluation, with all MIL stakeholders*;<br>- *To encourage media and information literacy for a critical and reflective evaluation of information and to raise the awareness of manipulations and propaganda.* |
| 2019 | Declaration by the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe on Citizenship Education in the Digital Age | Council of Europe | - *Take advantage of the potential of digital technologies to put them at the service of education for inclusive citizenship, in particular for the benefit of students with special educational needs*;<br>- *Facilitate cooperation between all stakeholders to promote cross-sector digital citizenship education projects, while preserving the balance between young people in controlling use and protecting rights*;<br>- *Encourage international cooperation in the field of digital citizenship education, with the aim of identifying shared issues, interests and priorities.* |

According to the European Commission, media literacy can be defined as "the ability to access the media, to critically understand and evaluate the different aspects of the media and its contents and to create communications in different contexts" [5]. Moreover, "the aim of media literacy is to increase people's awareness to the many forms of media messages encountered in their everyday lives. Media messages are the programmes, films, images, texts, sounds and websites that are carried by different forms of communication" [5]. In 2010, European Commission added a second dimension to this definition, considering that media literacy should raise "awareness of cultural, political, and economic contexts with an emphasis on critical thinking" [6]. Therefore, the definition of media literacy is dynamic, complex and multidimensional.

The British regulator OFCOM [7] defines several dimensions of media literacy: i). access - use, interest and competence; ii). understanding - trust in the media, levels of interest for each platform, knowledge and skills of use; iii). creation - content creation, ability to interact with others. The Danish Technological Institute (DTI) and the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI) [8] propose a definition of media literacy based on four dimensions: context, access, critical understanding and communication. Hobbs [9] postulated five dimensions of media and digital literacy: access, analyse, create, reflect and act.

The Seville Recommendation of 2002 states that "media education is part of the basic right of all citizens in all countries of the world to freedom of expression and the right to information and is instrumental in creating and sustaining democracy". Buckingham argues that media literacy as a "fundamental human right" [10]. Koltay claims that "the importance of media literacy is justified not only by the quantity of media exposure. The vital role of information in the development of democracy, cultural participation and active citizenship also justifies it" [11].

The media and technology mediate the various daily spheres of activity. Therefore, media literacy assumes particular relevance in i). democracy, participation and active citizenship; ii). knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice; iii). lifelong learning [12].

## 1.2  Digital Divide and Social Exclusion

Castells [13] argues that illiteracy is the 'new poverty' of contemporaneity. It can be assumed as a new type of 'functional illiteracy', which translates the lack of skills to exist and coexist in the context of a global information society. Therefore, the digital divide has one macro level and multiple micro levels, which result from different constraints. According to Selwyn, digital divide "can be seen as a practical embodiment of the wider theme of social inclusion" [14]. Sorj claims that "there is a strong correlation between the digital divides and other forms of social inequality" [15].

"This information age has never been a technological matter. It has always been a matter of social transformation, a process of social change in which technology is an element that is inseparable from social, economic, cultural and political trends", Castells and Catterall [16] argue. In this line of reasoning, Varnelis and Friedberg argue that "the transition toward network culture is not merely technological, it is deeply tied into societal changes" [17].

The dimensions of social exclusion - assuming they are not synonymous with poverty - can then apply to digital illiteracy and are thus multidimensional, dynamic, relational, active and contextual [1]. According to the World Summit for Social Development [18], an inclusive society is a "society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play". Media and digital literacy play a critical role towards an inclusive society.

From this perspective and within the context of digital illiteracy, 'disadvantaged groups' can be defined in a multidimensional range that comprises indicators of the absence of social rights, micro levels of social exclusion, and groups that are removed from the digital information society [1]. Communication for development and social change is anchored in media literacy, as its focus is on "empowering citizens through their active involvement in problem identification, the development of strategic solutions and their implementation" [19].

According to the European Council, "education is neither the sole cause of, nor the sole solution to, social exclusion. Educational measures alone are unlikely to alleviate the impact of multiple disadvantages, and multisectoral approaches are needed which can articulate such measures with wider social and economic policies" [20]. Therefore, "remains significant scope to reduce inequalities and exclusion in the EU, both through structural changes and through additional support for learners at risk of social exclusion" [20]. Given the contexts of inequality and the risk of social exclusion, the

European Commission has adopted the strategic objective of media literacy and digital inclusion policies.

## 1.3   Indicators from the European Context

Reference to info-included and info-excluded societies from the digital landscape is compelling when reflecting on the geography of the new socio-technological spaces. The dynamics of these territories are directly associated with the way social, demographic, economic and technological variables condition each other, revealing the potential for information and knowledge dissemination through technologies. In the European context, Eurostat data show that 89% of EU-28 households have internet access (Figure 1).

**Internet access and broadband internet connections of households, EU-28, 2008-2018**
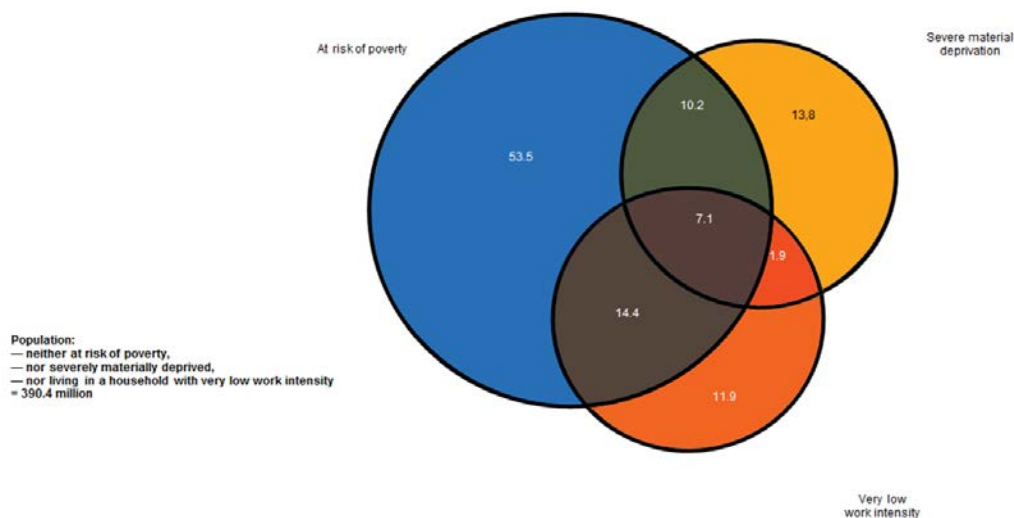(% of all households)
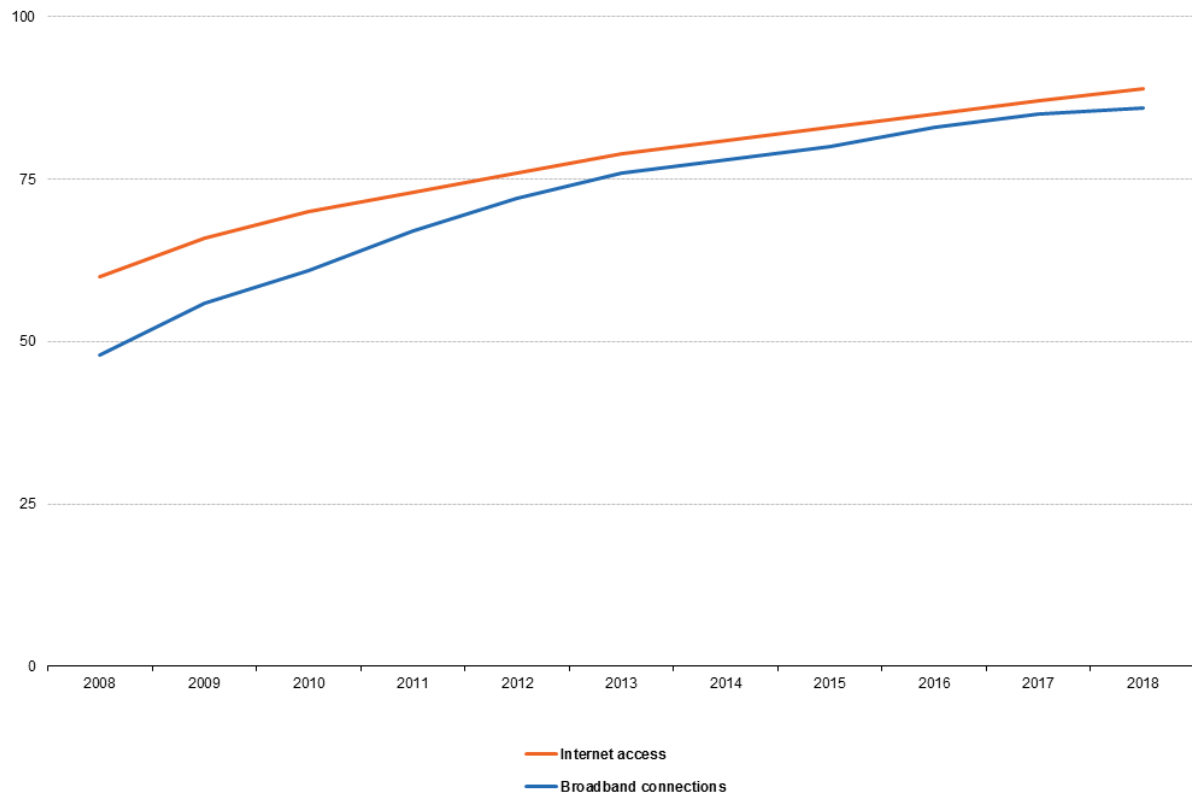


Source: Eurostat (online data codes: isoc_ci_in_h and isoc_ci_it_h)

eurostat

*Figure 1: Internet access and broadband internet connections of households, EU-28, 2008-2018 (% of all households). Source: Eurostat (online data code: isoc_ci_in_h and isoc_ci_it_h).*

However, in 2017, 22.4 % of the EU-28 population who lived in households were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Fig. 2).

At risk of poverty or social exclusion by type of risks, EU-28, 2017
(million)

At risk of poverty

Severe material deprivation

53.5

10.2

13.8

7.1

1.9

14.4

11.9

Population:
— neither at risk of poverty,
— nor severely materially deprived,
— nor living in a household with very low work intensity
= 390.4 million

Very low
work intensity

Note: the sum of the data for the seven groups at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion differs slightly from the total
(published elsewhere) due to rounding.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_pees01)

eurostat

*Figure 2: At risk of poverty or social exclusion by type of risks, EU-28. Source: Eurostat*
*(online data code: ilc_pees01).*

These data are consistent with the so-called "second level of digital exclusion" [21]. This concept refers to realities where Internet access is assured, but people do not have the skills to use it productively ([14], [22]). As a result, digital inclusion goes beyond traditional access parameters.

## 2  METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to identify and analyse European recommendations and proposals oriented to policies that promote media literacy and digital inclusion focused on disadvantaged groups. The main goal is to understand which dimensions and strategies are proposed to avoid social exclusion.

The methodological approach adopted was document analysis combined with content analysis [23]. First, we identify the main recommendations on media literacy and digital inclusion issued by the Council of Europe / European Commission since 2000. Then, and following the proposal from Frau-Meigs, Velez and Flores Michael [24], we analysed and categorised the documents into five dimensions: policy-making, capacity-building (training, research, resources and funding), evaluation, stakeholders and international cooperation.

## 3  RESULTS

The majority of the official documents with recommendations for action and political action present similar conceptualisations of disadvantaged groups: youth, adults, seniors and communities/groups with specific characteristics (cultural, social, economic and/or geographic). Empowerment is the keyword of the several documents that are focused on teaching, good practices, induction of cultural shift and public-private partnerships at regional and national levels through different approaches: media literacy, ICT skills, action strategies and the digital divide.

*Table 2. Recommendations from Council of Europe / European Commission. Source: MILOBS [4].*

| Year | Document | Focus | Dimensions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2000 | Recommendation 1466 of the Council Of Europe Parliamentary Assembly on Education for Media | Media Education<br><br>Lifelong Learning | Policy-making<br><br>Capacity-building: training<br><br>Capacity-building: funding<br><br>Stakeholders: civil society, public institutions and private institutions |
| 2006 | Recommendation 12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Empowering Children in the New Information and Communications Environment | Freedom of Expression<br><br>Digital Literacy<br><br>Human rights<br><br>Privacy on the Internet | Capacity-building: training<br><br>Stakeholders: civil society<br><br>Policy-making<br><br>Capacity-building: resources |
| 2007 | Council of Europe Recommendations on Media Educational Policies | Media Education<br><br>Freedom of Expression<br><br>Lifelong Learning | Capacity-building: training<br><br>Capacity-building: research<br><br>Capacity-building: resources<br><br>Stakeholders: civil society |
| 2009 | Commission Recommendation on Medical Literacy in the Digital Environment for a More Competitive Audiovisual and Content Industry and Knowledge Society | Media Education<br><br>Digital Literacy | Capacity-building: training<br><br>Capacity-building: research<br><br>Policy-making<br><br>Stakeholders: public institutions and private institutions |
| 2009 | Recommendation Cm/Rec(2009)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Measures to Protect Children Against Harmful Content and Behaviour and to Promote Their Active Participation in the New Information and Communications Environment | Human Rights<br><br>Freedom of Expression<br><br>Privacy on  the Internet | International cooperation<br><br>Capacity-building: resources<br><br>Capacity-building: training<br><br>Stakeholders: civil society |
| 2019 | Recommendation Cm/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Guidelines to Respect, Protect and Fulfil The Rights of the Child in the Digital Environment | Human Rights<br><br>Access to Digital Environment<br><br>Freedom of Expression and Information<br><br>Privacy and Data Protection<br><br>Digital Literacy | Policy-making<br><br>Stakeholders: civil society, public institutions and private institutions<br><br>Capacity-building: training |

The teaching oriented to the media, media literacy in teacher training, focus on the elderly population and guarantee of access to technology are common issues to multiple official plans of recommendations. In 2008, the European Parliament adopted a resolution (2008/2129 (INI)) which observes that "media literacy should be understood as the ability to autonomously use the diverse media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and its contents, as well as to communicate in different contexts, create and distribute content media" [25]. The document notes that "media literacy begins in the family context, with learning the way to select the services offered by the media" [25]. By emphasising the importance of family in children habits concerning media, the document stresses the role of school, regulators, as well as agents and institutions that operate in the field of media in ensuring the right to information.

Most perspectives adopted by the recommendations and plans are centred on the individual as a potential user of devices and digital and cultural capital that allows the inclusion in an information society. The recommendations are for active policies and strategies at various levels, mainly through local initiatives that have a national scope and, therefore, adopt the logic of networked communities. Policy proposals are action-oriented to individuals framed in disadvantaged groups at a macro (national) and micro levels (community, local and regional) The plans of recommendations in terms of digital literacy, as mentioned, are often guided to direct action.

In several recommendations, the digital inclusion strategy identifies essential issues like qualification, accessibility, simplification and improvement of services, creation of public infrastructure, promoting networking and knowledge transfer. Network based strategies aim to provide access through distribution, tools and infrastructures that focus on education, training, public services, community programs, private sector and cooperation with the media. As a way of knowledge transfer and networking-enhancing digital inclusion of the excluded in the global information society, the technology requires policies on inclusive education, public service that combats social and digital exclusion, infrastructures and general access through devices such as computers and mobile phones.

The majority of the plans also focus on action and empowerment through training to create conditions that may enhance change. The opportunity of creating jobs as an indirect benefit of the technology is highlighted in the issue of change: strengthen and empower the end of the label 'disadvantaged'.

In Europe, the increase in quality of life of 'third age' and 'fourth age', as well as high rates of life expectancy lead to the need to develop strategies for education/training throughout life, conciliated with a substantial investment in an education-oriented to mobility and the labour market. The objectives of the project "The Europe 2020" focuses precisely on these ideas: "making lifelong learning and mobility a reality", "improving the quality and efficiency of education and training", "promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship", "enhancing innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training". The need to recognise skills and qualify individuals is the dominant note in the integration of disadvantaged groups in the information society.

## 4   CONCLUSIONS

Most of the recommendations focus on "the individual as a potential user of devices and cultural and digital capital that enables them to be included in an information society" [26]. The analysed recommendations focus on active policies and strategies at various levels and dimensions, mainly through local initiatives that have a national scope and therefore adopt the logic of communities of practice and networking.

The analysed documents are anchored to three dominant dimensions: policy-making, capacity-building and stakeholders. International cooperation is only occasionally referred. It is also noted an absence of the evaluation dimension of both public policies and teaching and research programs.

Media education, media literacy in teacher education, a focus on the elderly and ensuring access to technology are common ground in the various official plans of recommendations. The results show that these plans converge to the acquisition of skills in different contexts (individual and social) that translate into tools that allow access, critical thinking and communication. The priorities of the plans focus on scientific research and dissemination of best practice documents; validation of different formal and non-formal teaching approaches; promotion of research consortia and policies for action to ensure the integration of joint strategies.

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