

Challenges for Media and Information Literacy (MIL) policies in Latin America and the Caribbean¹

Desafíos para las políticas en Alfabetización Mediática e Informativa (AMI) en América Latina y el Caribe

Desafios para as políticas de alfabetização midiática e informativa (MAI) na América Latina e no Caribe

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Abstract: This article examines the challenges of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) policies in Latin America and the Caribbean. In a context marked by misinformation, hate speech, and artificial intelligence, MIL emerges as a key tool for empowering citizens and fostering critical participation in the digital ecosystem. Through recent examples and data, the importance of an inclusive MIL that addresses both the digital divide and the need for robust national regulations is highlighted. Finally, the article emphasizes the role of MIL in building a trustworthy and resilient digital space that respects human rights.

Keywords:

Media and Information Literacy, Misinformation, Human Rights, Digital Divide, Public Policy, Latin America

Resumen: Este artículo analiza los desafíos de las políticas de Alfabetización Mediática e Informativa (AMI) en América Latina y el Caribe. En un contexto marcado por la desinformación, el discurso de odio y la inteligencia artificial, la AMI se presenta como una herramienta clave para empoderar a los ciudadanos y fomentar la participación crítica en el ecosistema digital. A través de ejemplos y datos recientes, se destaca la importancia de una AMI inclusiva que aborde tanto la brecha digital como la necesidad de regulaciones nacionales

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sólidas. Finalmente, el artículo subraya el papel de la AMI en la construcción de un espacio digital confiable y resiliente que respete los derechos humanos.

Palabras clave:

Alfabetización Mediática e Informativa, Desinformación, Derechos humanos, Brecha digital, Políticas públicas, América Latina

Resumo: Este artigo examina os desafios das políticas de Alfabetização Midiática e Informativa (AMI) na América Latina e no Caribe. Em um contexto marcado pela desinformação, discurso de ódio e inteligência artificial, a AMI surge como uma ferramenta essencial para empoderar os cidadãos e promover a participação crítica no ecossistema digital. Através de exemplos e dados recentes, destaca-se a importância de uma AMI inclusiva que aborde tanto a desigualdade digital quanto a necessidade de regulamentações nacionais sólidas. Finalmente, o artigo ressalta o papel da AMI na construção de um espaço digital confiável e resiliente que respeite os direitos humanos.

Palavras-chave:

Alfabetização Midiática e Informativa, Desinformação, Direitos humanos, Desigualdade digital, Políticas públicas, América Latina

As digital environments have an ever-increasing impact on almost every facet of our lives, people must develop the ability to be active participants in the digital spaces they inhabit and thus avoid being passive consumers of information. This skill is vital in a context marked by an abundance of misinformation, hate speech, and a constant flow of data that can negatively impact the ability to make informed decisions. Furthermore, with the arrival of artificial intelligence, the lines are blurred between human-generated content generated by AI, so new capabilities are needed to distinguish between the two.

As technology advances and takes us to previously unimaginable territories, it is, therefore, more urgent than ever to strengthen the capacities of citizens to navigate these realities. According to a recent UNESCO/IPSOS survey conducted in 16 countries, 87% of respondents are concerned about the impact of disinformation, particularly during electoral

processes, and 47% are very concerned. All this in a context in which 56% of citizens use networks as their primary source of news and 67% of them have encountered hate speech online.

From this reality arises the need to increase the efforts of States to increase the resilience of citizens in the face of these challenges. In the Pact for the Future, approved by the United Nations General Assembly in September of this year, the integrity of information takes a central place in the new agenda of priorities for humanity, recognizing the role that information plays as a crucial part of our democratic systems. Therefore, countries must build an inclusive, open, secure digital space that respects, protects, and promotes human rights.

The foundations for a more people-centered, democratic, inclusive, and resilient information ecosystem must be laid to achieve this aspiration. Citizen media and information literacy (MIL) is central to this strategy. The Compact for the Future recognizes the need for a strong commitment by states to develop MIL programmes by 2030.

Media and information literacy (MIL) is a broad concept that encompasses the skills needed to access, analyze, evaluate, use, and create information in different media, both digital and traditional. UNESCO defines MIL as an umbrella concept encompassing all the skills needed to navigate the media and information ecosystem. It empowers citizens to think critically and provides them with the necessary capacities to participate in digital services and the management of information in an informed and ethical manner.

MIL involves interpreting media messages and understanding the ecosystem where information is produced and distributed. This includes critical evaluation of information sources and the ability to access and create ethical and reliable content in digital media. In addition, MIL encourages informed decision-making and the defense of the rights to freedom of expression and access to information. In an increasingly digitalized world, these skills are essential to navigate a complex information environment rife with misinformation.

MIL is not a new concept, but it emerged with the challenges of what is now called traditional media, particularly electronic media. UNESCO has promoted MIL in recent decades, but the issue has taken on a renewed centrality with the challenges of digital environments. This centrality allows MIL to work with a new impetus and more ambitious objectives. Through initiatives such as the “Global Media and Information Literacy Week,” UNESCO has collaborated with governments, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and

private sector actors worldwide to encourage the adoption of policies that promote MIL in educational systems and society in general.

UNESCO has also provided guidance, tools, and normative frameworks for integrating MIL into national policies, emphasizing the need for countries to adopt a holistic approach that encompasses not only the inclusion of MIL in school curricula but also a transversal manner, including in the protection of human rights, in the development of public sector capacities and the creation of multi-sector alliances. In addition, the importance of MIL has been promoted in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Historically, Latin America has been fertile ground for experimentation in MIL practices, often arising in communities, universities, or even schools under other epistemologies. However, universal access to these actions through national public policies remains challenging for governments and civil society organizations. There is still a long way to go before these specific experiences can be transformed into State policies.

Despite the progress, many countries still lack a clear regulatory framework for implementing MIL, making its integration into formal and informal educational systems difficult. A mapping carried out by UNESCO, together with the Ibero-American Audiovisual Regulators Platform (PRAI), shows that only 50% of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have specific regulations on MIL, and only a minority of regulatory bodies have the resources to promote them.

Another significant challenge is the digital divide, a major barrier in many regions. Despite technological advances, many communities still lack adequate access to ICTs, which limits their ability to participate fully in the media and information ecosystem. Although the Internet penetration rate is 87% in the region, it can drop to percentages as low as 27% in the low-income population. UNESCO has therefore pointed out that the implementation of MIL policies must be accompanied by efforts to ensure equity in access to ICTs, allowing all sectors of society, especially the most vulnerable, to benefit from these skills.

The MIL agenda intersects with the need to develop human-centered digital governance that respects and protects human rights. While strengthening the capacities and resilience of citizens to face the challenges of digital environments, States must also organize themselves at the national level to impose rules that lead to respect for human rights online. UNESCO explored

this topic in depth, together with 4,000 representatives from different sectors, at the Forum For a Trustworthy Internet, held in Paris in February 2023. The Forum analyzed how digital platforms and internet use affect the quality of information and democracy and the role of digital governance in ensuring an ethical and safe online environment.

This Forum was followed by an unprecedented consultation process, which included 10,500 inputs from 134 countries—from this consultation process emerged the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms, a tool to guide States in their reflection and search for responses to the challenges of the digital environment (disinformation, hate speech, right to privacy, right of access to information and freedom of expression), as well as the need to preserve the integrity of data and develop human-centered digital governance that respects and protects human rights.

The Guidelines recommend that States establish multi-stakeholder forums at the national level that can promote, monitor, and evaluate comprehensive cross-cutting MIL policies as a first step while moving towards developing multi-stakeholder digital governance models. The Guidelines identify each actor's duties, responsibilities, and roles to protect human rights online. This ensures that each actor and the extensive digital platforms respect their transparency, due diligence, and accountability duties. The guidelines highlight the importance of emphasizing user empowerment through MIL as a critical tool to equip users with the skills necessary to identify and counter disinformation and other forms of manipulation in the digital environment. An informed and critical citizenry is an essential pillar for effective digital governance.

MIL can be essential in building trustworthy digital environments and resilient citizenship. To do so, it must overcome the barriers of the past, namely fragmented approaches, lack of leadership, and a shortage of strategic research. With the dimension of the new challenges, a solid political commitment will be needed, allowing the development of comprehensive cross-cutting public policies that provide MIL with the necessary resources to meet the aspirations of the Pact for the Future.

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