Council of the European Union

**Brussels, 6 November 2024
(OR. en)**

14733/24

CULT 97
EDUC 400
AUDIO 96
JEUN 268
DIGIT 214
RECH 473

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The role of libraries in media literacy development - *Policy debate*

Delegations will find attached the background document prepared by the Presidency as the basis for the policy debate at the Education, Youth, <u>Culture</u> and Sport Council meeting on 25-26 November 2024.

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The role of libraries in media literacy development

Policy debate

EYCS Council on 26 November 2024

1.   INTRODUCTION

The European Union Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026[1] recognises the evolving societal role of libraries, particularly in promoting literacy across Europe. Libraries are not merely repositories of books; they are critical platforms for community engagement, democratic participation and educational development, offering a wide range of services. Central to this role is their contribution to media literacy development, which has become a pressing need in an increasingly digital and information-saturated world.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of libraries as essential community hubs, as they adapted to deliver both physical and digital services during lockdowns. Libraries continued to offer access to reliable information, serving as crucial allies in combatting misinformation – a task that remains more relevant than ever. According to the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022)[2], libraries must function as facilitators of lifelong learning and media literacy, equipping citizens with the tools they need to navigate today's complex media environment.

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[1]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207(01)
[2]   IFLA: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions,
       https://www.ifla.org/public-library-manifesto/

The Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 also indicates that an open method of coordination (OMC) group should work on libraries between 2024 and 2025 to further examine the role of libraries in enhancing cultural participation and skills development, supporting not only literacy but also the broader goals of social inclusion and democracy. Furthermore, the Council of Europe and EBLIDA's guidelines[3] reiterate the crucial role that library policies play in fostering a democratic, well-informed, equitable, sustainable, cohesive, and inclusive society.

2.   KEY CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

The development of media literacy is one of the most significant challenges facing modern societies, including in Europe. Misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly, often exacerbated by digital platforms and a fragmented media landscape. As media technology is rapidly evolving, the skills people learn during formal education need constant updating. Libraries, through their trusted status and established presence in communities, are in a unique position to act as intermediaries between citizens and the vast amounts of information they encounter. They can do so by offering training, hosting educational programmes and providing resources that foster awareness about the consumption and creation of media. Libraries can thus act as multi-functional community learning centres while supporting lifelong learning.

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[3]   EBLIDA: European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations, https://www.eblida.org/News/2022/Council-of-Europe-EBLIDA-Guidelines-on-Library-legislation-and-policy-in-Europe-en.pdf

However, several key challenges must be addressed for libraries to fully realise this potential:

– Media literacy education gaps: The rapid evolution of digital technologies means that media literacy programmes must be regularly updated to remain relevant. Libraries need to offer training programmes and make available tools that not only teach basic media skills but also support formal education, especially in relation to analytical thinking, identifying credible sources, understanding media bias, navigating online platforms for a safe online experience, content creation skills, engaging in democratic participation and the ethical use of information. Libraries serve a wide range of users, from children to the elderly, with varying levels of media literacy skills. Providing tailored media literacy programmes to address the needs of different societal groups is thus essential.

– Infrastructure and funding: While many libraries have transitioned to digital services, disparities in infrastructure – especially in rural and remote areas – affect their effectiveness in promoting basic media literacy. Adequate funding is crucial to bridge these gaps and standardise the level of access to resources across all regions. Partnerships with schools, academia, tech companies, other relevant private sector companies, foundations and civil organisations pay a vital role in expanding media literacy programmes. Leveraging external expertise and resources can help to scale up media literacy initiatives to reach a broader audience, bring in targeted knowledge and develop tailored curricula.

– Librarian skill development: Libraries cannot advance media literacy skills without investing in their human resources. Librarians need continual training to stay abreast of technological advancements and the evolving needs of the communities they serve. The development of these skills is critical to ensuring that librarians can guide citizens in navigating today's digital information environment.

3.   QUESTIONS FOR THE POLICY DEBATE

The Presidency invites Ministers to explore and share insights into how libraries can enhance the media literacy skills of society, on the basis of the following questions:

–   The role of libraries: *How can libraries expand their media literacy programmes to improve media literacy and critical reading skills amongst citizens to help them to better address the challenges of the digital age (e. g. online disinformation, online bullying and online hate speech, deep fakes)?*

–   Resources needed to provide high-quality services: *What partnerships with e.g. academia, technology companies and organisations should be prioritised to ensure that libraries remain updated with the knowledge that society generally needs and what EU-level initiatives could contribute to this goal?*

–   Skills to be acquired by librarians: *What specific skills do librarians need to enhance their ability to teach media literacy and foster critical thinking among their users?*

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