

# The politics of media and information literacy

## Considering the ideological dimension of EAVI's media literacy project

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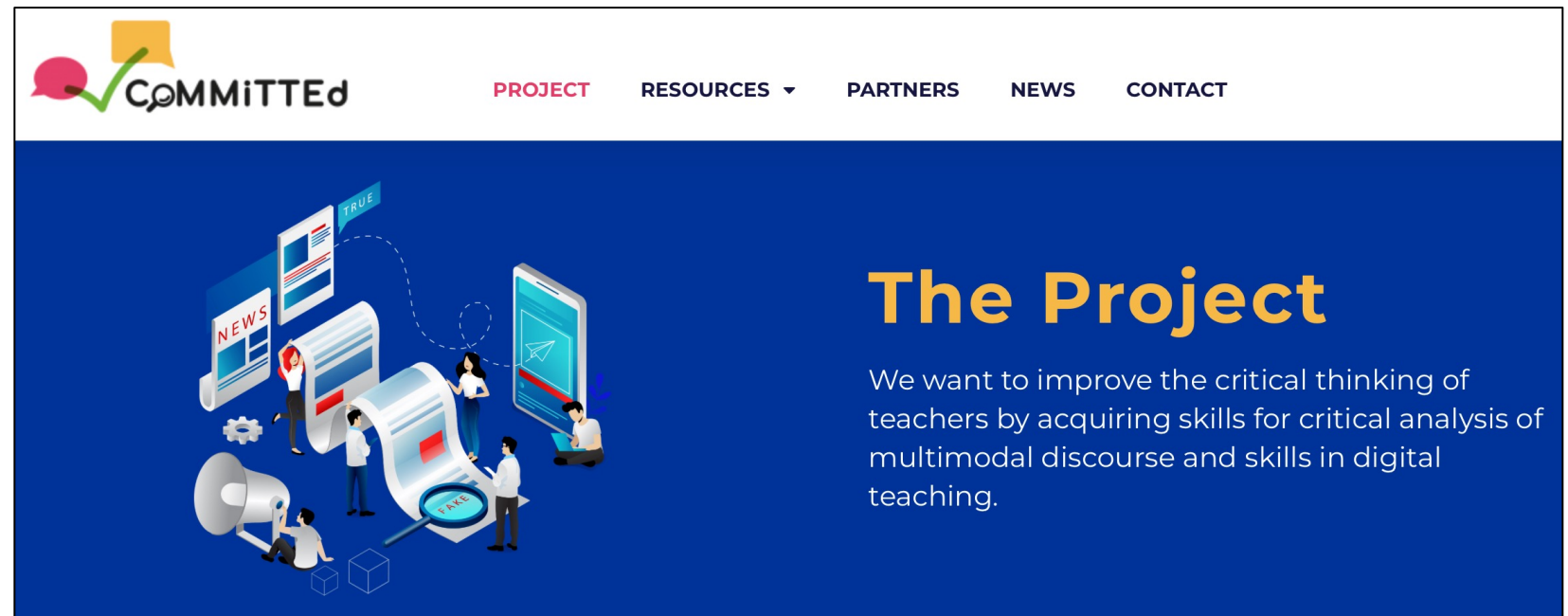
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# MIL discourse as Ideological Discourse ?

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**Critical studies in discourse and communication are often thought of as tools or means that can be used to develop forms of media and information literacy (MIL).**



The screenshot shows the header of the CoMMITTEd website. The logo on the left consists of a pink speech bubble, a green checkmark, and the text 'CoMMITTEd'. To the right of the logo is a navigation menu with the following items: 'PROJECT' in red, 'RESOURCES' with a dropdown arrow, 'PARTNERS', 'NEWS', and 'CONTACT'. The main content area has a dark blue background. On the left, there is an illustration of several people interacting with digital media: one person is at a computer, another is using a magnifying glass over a document labeled 'TRUE', and others are near a large screen displaying 'NEWS'. On the right, the title 'The Project' is written in large, bold, orange letters. Below the title, a paragraph of white text reads: 'We want to improve the critical thinking of teachers by acquiring skills for critical analysis of multimodal discourse and skills in digital teaching.'

# MIL discourse as Ideological Discourse ?

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It is also **possible to conduct a critical discourse** study in order **to analyse the political and/or ideological dimensions of MIL projects** themselves.

- What capacities, skills and/or forms of awareness are valued and stimulated?
- What notions of citizenship, politics and democracy are being articulated?
- What forms of critique are (not) being promoted in MIL projects?

**MIL projects can promote** different types of competences and skills, but also **different types of political subjectivity** and **critique**.

# MIL discourse as Ideological Discourse?

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The **complete analysis** of EAVI's MIL discourse can be consulted here:

Patriarche, G., & Zienkowski, J (2022). Shaping Political Subjectivity through Media and Information Literacy: A Critical Discourse Study of EAVI's Project. *Recherches En Communication*, 54, 271–290. (OPEN ACCESS)

The **conceptual and methodological decisions** taken in our study of EAVI are discussed in:

Zienkowski, J., & Patriarche, G. (forthcoming). Critical discourse studies for research on media and information literacy projects: An illustrated discussion of seven methodological considerations. In P. Fastrez & N. Landry (Red.), *Handbook of media literacy and media education research methods*. Routledge.

# MIL discourse as Ideological Discourse ?

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Every type of **political discourse** and **critique** has an **ideological dimension**. This **also** goes for the **discourse of MIL** itself.

- **Discourse** is a reflexive and performative practice of **articulation**. A practice whereby signifiers (e.g. words, sentences, narratives, images and sounds) get linked with each other. The meanings of such elements shift and change in the process.
- **Ideology** is a social and political function of discursive practices. Ideology is not (exclusively) a matter of generating false forms of consciousness. Ideology is the function that generates forms of political awareness, (de)legitimizing social identities, practices, relations and forms of (in)equality. It legitimates and normalizes but may also form the basis for critical and emancipatory projects.

# MIL as an academic discursive field

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## 1. There is a **tension between 'critical' and 'non-critical' approaches**

- The **debate on critique is an intellectual** minefield that has **implications for the notion(s) of citizenship** at the core of many **MIL projects**.
- The notion of **critique** appears mostly **as an adjective in MIL literature**: *critical awareness, critical understanding, critical thinking, ...*
- MIL can be approached as **a politically neutral set of tools** and practices or as **a politicizing and emancipatory activity**.

# MIL as an academic discursive field

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1. There is a **tension between ‘critical’ vs ‘non-critical’ approaches to MIL**
  - **Some avoid the notion of critique.** Potter (2019) explicitly rejects the signifier ‘critical thinking’ **because of its fuzziness**. He understands media literacy as a set of ‘cognitive activities’ requiring mental software and hardware.
  - **Often** the term is **left undefined**. It only **acquires meaning in relation to a concrete activity** or task. Fastrez (2010) implicitly defined ‘critical’ as a capacity to identify and evaluate the quality of information sources.
  - Some work with **explicit concepts of critique**. Halpern (2014) writes that “critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome ... thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal-directed” .
  - The **concept of critique** can also be **grounded in ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ philosophies**. Hidgon (2020) defines media literacy as the ability to recognize and problematize ideologies embedded in the media with references to Max Horkheimer and Stuart Hall. Mil becomes a “pedagogy of resistance and liberation”.

# MIL as an academic discursive field

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## 2. There is also a **tension** between **holistic** and **utilitarian MIL concepts**

- **Drotner et al. (2017, 269) argue that MIL is “caught in a double bind”:**

*On the one hand, MIL offers an opportunity for collective critical citizenship. On the other hand, MIL may operate as a tool for promoting neoliberalism, individualism and marketization.*

- **Functional or utilitarian approaches treat MIL as a set of skills for employment and employability.**
- **Holistic approaches construe MIL as a set of competences required for citizenship, participation, or “living together” (Landry & Roussel 2018).**

# EAVI – European Association of Viewers Interests

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We studied **how EAVI** – the European Association for Viewers Interests – **articulated concepts of critique, citizenship** and **MIL** on its website.

- Our **objective** was to analyse the type of **political subjectivity** and ideal-typical **society promoted by EAVI** through its discourse on MIL.
- We **did not aim to delegitimize EAVI** or similar MIL projects but rather to investigate the ideological dimension of its discourse.
- We argued **that MIL projects can never claim to be ideologically neutral.**

# EAVI – European Association of Viewers Interests

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**EAVI** presents itself as “**an international non-profit organization** registered in **Brussels** which **advocates media literacy** and **full citizenship**”:

*EAVI supports the adoption of initiatives that enable citizens to read, write and participate in public life through the media (EAVI website)*

EAVI carries out **studies to define and measure media literacy**. It **participates in EC and Council of Europe expert groups** on media and citizenship. It organizes international **conferences, events** and **trainings**.

Its **website** contains **articles, reposted-videos** (documentaries, interviews), and **content created by EAVI**.

# A CDS of EAVI's discourse – data, coding and analysis

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We analysed the **previous version of the EAVI website**. A new version has been launched in the recent past.

We uploaded a **data-set** of 70 documents into **Dedoose**:

- All **webpages and documents** including at least one **occurrence of MIL terms** (e.g., media literacy, digital literacy, data literacy)
- **EAVI blog posts** between 2020 and 2019 containing MIL related signifiers.
- **Four EAVI videos** (including time-stamped transcripts) of the series *A journey to media literacy*.

**Re-posted videos and documentaries were excluded** because they are not necessarily representative of EAVI's official MIL discourse.

# A CDS of EAVI's discourse – data, coding and analysis

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**In preparation of our CDS, we coded our data as follows:**

1. We **coded text segments** and four EAVI videos **containing explicit statements** about citizenship, literacy, and critique.
2. We **coded** these text segments for **implicit and explicit definitions** and descriptions of MIL, critique and citizenship.
3. We went through a **second cycle of coding** to group these definitions and descriptions at a higher level of abstraction.

**The CDS focused on the way EAVI articulates a preferred mode of subjectivity and society** via its statements on critique, citizenship and MIL.

# MIL as a transformative journey for the Self

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**PRESENTS**

FROM AN IDEA OF PAOLO CELOT & SUSIE JONES

# MIL as a transformative journey for the Self

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Throughout the **four *A journey to media literacy* videos** EAVI constructs **MIL as a transformative process**. For EAVI MIL is **more than a set of disparate skills and abilities**.

- MIL involves **a holistic transformation of the self** into an autonomous entity able to deal with dangerous entities, actors and processes.
- **What is lacking is any reference to MIL as a form of political or ideological awareness**. There is no mention of propaganda, the political implications of (dis)information, or forms of extremism.
- There are **no references made to specific political ideologies** such as nationalism, liberalism or Islamism. **Notions such as ideology or hegemony are not articulated** in the videos either.

These **observations do not mean that EAVI is entirely oblivious to matters of politics and ideology** altogether. This becomes clear once we start to focus on EAVI's textual production.

# MIL as a democratic project for EU societies

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The **MIL discourse of EAVI** is intertwined with a liberal and pro-EU discourse condemning forms of **nationalism** and **extremism**.

1. **EAVI's ideal (EU) society is inclusive:** MIL projects should be *“inclusive and accessible to those who are considered minorities, marginalized and vulnerable”* such as *“children, elderly, refugees, disabled and economically insecure”* citizens.
2. **EU (nation-states)** are ideally characterized by a **high degree of social cohesion**, marked by a positive stance towards the abovementioned notion of inclusiveness.
3. **EAVI values** *multiculturalism, diversity, and democracy*, throughout its MIL discourse.

**EAVI generally avoids political stances** but becomes **partisan when the EU is concerned**.

*EAVI's Future of Europe manifesto* even cites Guy Verhofstadt: *“Even if the EU is not perfect, it's the best idea we've had so far.”*

# MIL as a democratic project for EU societies

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**EAVI** posits an ideal society as well as obstacles that need to be overcome to reach this ideal. This is a basic ideological structure (Glynos & Howarth 2007)

**EAVI** identifies **several MIL-related threats** to the realization of **its ideal society**. These include:

- **Indifference** of citizens and policy makers **regarding MIL**.
  - **Ignorance** of one's own **relation to and use of media** (contents)
  - **Ignorance** about the **way actors seek to influence citizens** via media
  - **Active propagation of Eurosceptic stances** through **disinformation**
  - **Nationalism and populism** as **antithetical to the EU project**
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- ➔ **MIL is understood as a necessary condition for trust in democratic institutions and the EU institutions** in particular.

# MIL as a democratic project for EU societies

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EAVI finds **an ethical and normative basis for its preferred liberal democratic mode of citizenship** and MIL in **human rights** discourse:

- **EAVI** writes that term citizenship is "usually used as a synonym of nationality". It **defines citizenship more broadly as "membership in a community"**.
- The **following values are invoked**: 'freedom of opinion and expression', the right to be 'correctly informed', rights to 'transparency' and 'privacy'.
- **MIL** is framed as the **means through which people know (how to benefit from) their (human) rights and duties in mediatized EU environments**.

# MIL as a democratic project for EU societies

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**EAVI considers MIL essential for the EU and for democracy because it enables citizens to participate.**

*How can citizens **participate** responsibly in a democratic society if they cannot navigate news and make informed decisions? How is democracy to survive under these conditions (EAVI 2020).*

The term **participation** is used **in a fuzzy way**: participation in the media, in political processes, in democratic life, in civil society, in civic life, and in society in general.

The term is **almost exclusively used to refer to *reception* activities**. MIL can contribute to participation by helping citizens to gain control over their media consumption.

**Participation is not** used as a term to indicate a process whereby **citizens get to have a say in the way media are produced or organized**.

# Conclusions and food for discussion

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## How can CDS be used in and for MIL purposes and projects?

- The development of **media literacy** should involve an awareness of **the ideological dimensions of mediatized** discursive practices.
- From a CDS perspective **media literacy cannot be developed fully without** a form of **ideological and historical literacy**.
- **Ideological (media) literacy** cannot be developed fully if we do not consider the type of political subjectivity and society MIL is supposed to promote.

# Conclusions and food for discussion

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**Our study of EAVI demonstrates that media literacy projects have implications for the transformation of self and society.**

They have **ideological implications** in the sense that they come with **implicit and explicit political imaginaries** for (re-)shaping self and society.

Presenting its project as the only reasonable option, EAVI betrays **hegemonic ambitions** (legitimate or not).

- Key MIL terms are often left undefined (e.g., participation, citizens, critical)
- The ideological orientation of MIL projects is often left implicit.
- This may be due to strategic goals (funding, positioning)
- ➔ **The strategic avoidance of an explicit ideological position may lead to the omission of particular forms of critique.**