MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION: SEEU PROFESSOR AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

We are living in the disinformation age or in that of a revolution in propaganda, which gives rise to fragile democracies, vulnerable citizens, less capable deliberations, new forms of subversion, misuse of information by third parties etc. North Macedonia is a highly fragmented and polarized society, which gives space to the impact of malign actors for achieving their geopolitical goals such as to destabilize, weaken ties with the West or just increase their presence. Resilience, thus, has become the shield of contemporary information warfare. Media and Information Literacy education through the development of critical thinking in the young generation is a conditio sine qua non for building resilience to disinformation. This study argues that universities as agents of change have the mission to lead the process of building societal resilience through Media and Information Literacy education. In this paper the researchers from the Media Literacy and Disinformation Research Cluster at Max van der Stoel Institute (MVDSI), South East European University (SEEU) through a mixed-method–approach based on both qualitative and quantitative methods, examine the perceptions of SEEU academic staff members and students regarding Media and Information Literacy education at the university level. Data from the staff questionnaire (n=45) suggest that the majority of academic staff members across all SEEU faculties and institutes perceive Media and Information Literacy education as one of the ways to make youth resilient to disinformation. Moreover, the student questionnaire (n=105) revealed similar results. SEEU students stated their desire for the introduction of Media and Information Literacy as an elective course in their curricula, as one of the best ways to become resilient to disinformation on the internet. Ways and modalities of implementation and course content remain objects of exploration.

Keywords: disinformation, resilience, Media and Information Literacy education, SEEU.

1) INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, access to information is closer to us than ever before. The internet and social media have made it easier for individuals to access and share information where the individual could also be the creator of the message. The overload of information available online has also led to an increase in disinformation and misinformation. The spread of false and misleading information has brought the necessity to speak for media and information literacy education as a tool to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge to critically evaluate the information they consume.

Living in an era of information overload it has become difficult to distinguish the truth from the untruth each day. The amount of content that users produce every second is so tremendous that, as a society, we are constantly bombarded with new information, the veracity of which is often highly questionable (O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Hence, misinformation and disinformation find a suitable environment for testing their impact. Disinformation is the intended message to deceive and manipulate, whereas misinformation is the unintentional spread of false or inaccurate information. Misinformation could be a derivative of disinformation, but disinformation could never be a consequence of misinformation. However, both leave considerable implications in society. The disinformation age imposes new mechanisms that we must follow to be protected. Disinformation intends to cause disunity and uncertainty and interrupt the progressive development of one country. Woolley and Joseph (2020) have defined disinformation from the intent's perspective as a broad term usually referring to the "purposeful use of non-rational argument to undermine a political ideal, inflame social division, or engender political cynicism". The deficit in digital media literacy has been identified as a critical factor explaining widespread belief in online misinformation (Brisola & Doyle, 2019). We will not delve into the reasons for these activities, but we will try to rationalize why Media and Information Literacy is a must nowadays.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education is a process that enables individuals to access, analyze, evaluate and reflect on information faced. This process has become an essential life skill to navigate in the digital age. MIL education also engages in knowing how to critically evaluate the information that is shared and how to use it to make informed decisions through accessing digital technology. The importance of MIL education has been recognized by many stakeholders, including governments, educators, and international organizations, who have been working to promote MIL education as an essential life skill for citizens. UNESCO defines MIL as "the knowledge and skills required to find, analyze, critically evaluate and generate information in various media and contexts." and emphasizes that MIL education is crucial for "promoting a culture of peace and sustainable development" (Singh et. al., 2015). An already accepted definition for Media literacy is that "Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in all its forms" (Pernisco, 2020).

Democratic countries worldwide attach great importance to media education in school curricula. Among primary and secondary schools, universities play a crucial role in developing specific curricula for establishing youth professionals ready to face new technological challenges in the information space. Adding to this, the responsibility of the universities to foster a culture of critical thinking through MIL that will help to combat disinformation and contribute to broader resilience. A society that is media and information literate "fosters the development of free, independent and pluralistic media and open information systems" (UNESCO, 2011, p. 20).

Based on the multiple country reports for malign foreign influences, no state can be entirely resilient to disinformation. However, the level of susceptibility varies on the state's internal factors and its geostrategic orientation. According to the

GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021 Report, North Macedonia was classified as the most resilient of the Western Balkan countries examined by the Index, with a score of 40/100. Its society, however, finds itself polarized into antagonistic political camps and remains vulnerable (GLOBSEC, 2021). This vulnerability is present due to various factors, the most important of which are: the EU accession fatigue and pro-Russian attitudes due to its Slavic population. Other internal factors that make the society susceptible to disinformation are: the multiethnic character of society, which has not been reflected fully into the functioning of the state, the multi religious character of the society which gives space to foreign actors, mostly states to interfere through various ways and methods, two strict lines that divide the political landscape: the ethnic line and the ideological line being more present at the Macedonian political camp, and which often merges with the geostrategic alignments.

Despite the recognition of the importance of MIL education, there is a need for more research to understand the stakeholders' viewpoints of MIL education in higher education institutions as an indisputable condition for the successful implementation of the MIL education. Bajrami et. al, (2022) study for introducing Media and Information Literacy in South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia, identified that future research should include a wider group of SEEU professors and students, as well as repetition of the distribution of the survey in different periods and distribution of the survey for a longer time would generate more responses from students. Also, the need for a qualitative research approach in order to clearly identify the opinion of the professors and students for a MIL course was highlighted. The current study tries to complement the gaps identified in the previous research.

Thus, this research paper aims to explore the perceptions of professors and students on the necessity and implementation of MIL education in the age of disinformation. The study will focus on professors' and students' perceptions of MIL education at South East European University and its importance in the age of disinformation. The research will also explore their opinion on addressing the information disorder phenomenon through introducing the new course for Media and Information Literacy.

This research has been organized as a part of the project activities *'SEEU Students 5.0: Media and Information Literacy in the Age of Disinformation'*, implemented by Max van der Stoel Institute at South East European University and within the framework of the project YouThink that is led by IREX and funded by USAID. The aim of this project was to develop and enhance media literacy and information skills among South East European University students through formal education, hence introducing Media and Information Literacy as an elective course for students of every faculty at South East European University. The outcome of the need assessment with key stakeholders (SEEU students, staff, management) as one of the project activities was foreseen to be - getting accurate feedback about the perception and attitudes of the students, staff, and stakeholders regarding the introduction of the Media and Information Literacy course at the university curricula.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for MIL education in South East European University and help increase a consensus for implementing MIL in all higher education institutions in North Macedonia. The research will also provide insights into the opinion of professors and students on the need to build societal resilience through MIL. The findings of this study will particularly be useful for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the field of MIL education, but also in the higher education field in general.

2) METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted through a closed survey, adding one additional open question with professors and students at South East European University. The survey is designed to gather data on professors' and students' perceptions of MIL education and its importance in the age of disinformation. The final open question is intended to gather more in-depth information about their opinion on the need for MIL education at SEEU.

A mixed-method–approach based on both qualitative and quantitative methods was employed for this research. Two self-completion questionnaires administering a closed-ended Google Forms web-based survey for South East European students and academic staff, including the management of the South East European University were applied. Both questionnaires were sent through university generic email to undergraduate and graduate students as well as to the SEEU academic staff during the period July-October 2022.

The *Questionnaire for Media and Information Literacy (students)* was distributed to the undergraduate and master students of the South East European University (SEEU) through the group email on October 5, 2022. It was composed of questions starting from general to more specific ones. The questionnaire was completed by 105 out of 1937 BA and 833 MA active students in the 2022/2023 academic year. This represents the sample of 3,8 percent of the total active student number in SEEU.

The *Questionnaire on Media and Information Literacy (SEEU academic staff)* was distributed through a group email to all academic staff of the South East European University (SEEU) on July 8, 2022. Questions, written in the three official languages used at SEEU, Albanian, Macedonian, and English, were organized the same way as for the students - starting from general to specific ones. The target audience of this questionnaire

was all the SEEU academic staff, and their participation is presented in percentage. The questionnaire was completed by the sample of 50 percent respondents out of total SEEU full-time academic staff. Respectively, the questionnaire was answered by 45 out of 89 members of the academic full-time staff at SEEU including the high management of the university.

3) FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Assessing professors' perception on including Media and information literacy course at SEEU

The questionnaire was completed by 45 out of 89 members of the full-time SEEU academic staff and its management. The majority of respondents were from the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication with 28.3% which is a very important indicator for this study for the reason that the majority of the professors who are part of this faculty will be lecturers in this subject and future subjects in the field of MIL education. 6.6% of the respondents have high positions in the management of SEEU which is an important indicator for the support of MIL education in SEEU, as well as for maintaining the sustainability of it in the future. The same is true for the percentage of faculty management which is 13%. Their participation and support is also vital for the implementation of this initiative in all the respective faculties. The lowest number among the SEEU faculty members are those from the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies, which is interpreted as something normal, given their professional expertise in the field of digital literacy in particular. The visual composition of the respondents is shown in the chart below (Figure 1):
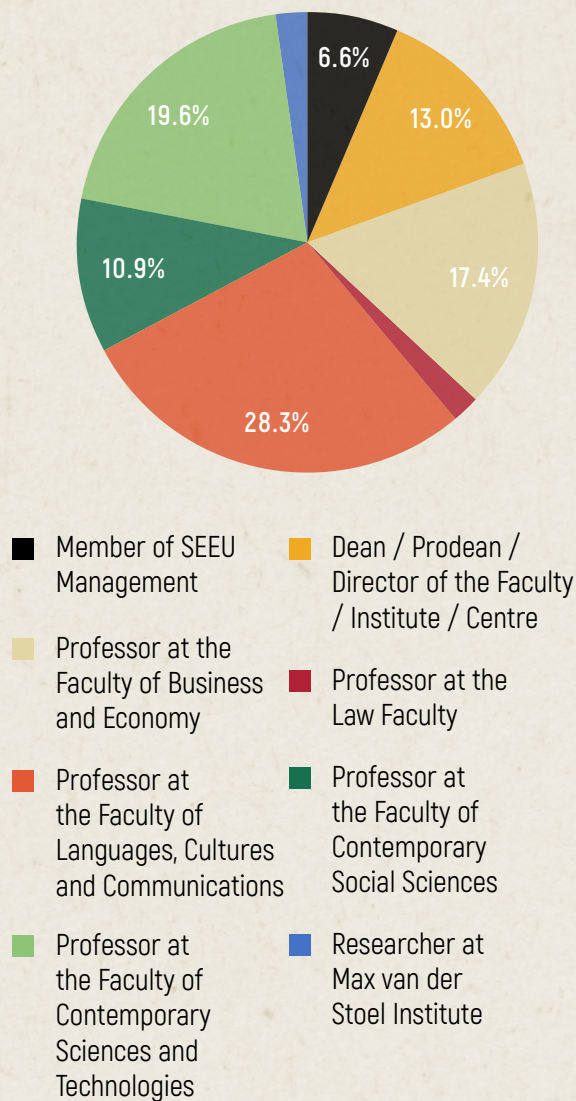
Figure 1. Composition of the respondents' positions

The academic staff of SEEU have been asked about their perception of students' time-frequency in social networks. 97.8% of them think that their students spend too much time on social networks, while only 2.2% have stated that they do not know. No answer with 'No' was recorded.

The majority of SEEU academic staff, 57.8% perceive that students do not have the necessary skills to face various manipulations in social networks. Only 15.6% of them think that students are equipped with the skills that make them resilient to various online manipulations. Being aware that manipulations on the internet are present and

unavoidable, they do not think that the students should not spend much time on the internet, but on the contrary, their advice is that they should not believe everything they read on social networks, but rather approach the information found there critically. The percentage of professors who think this way is 84.4.

The overall perception on the presence and frequency of fake news on the internet is almost unanimous. To investigate their perception of the frequency of fake news in social media, the question about how much manipulative information is circulating on social networks was added to the survey. 93,3% of the professors think that fake news is present often on the internet, and only 6.7% think that fake news is found on the internet occasionally.

The academic staff in higher percentage, 91.1% think that our university should undertake actions to make students more vigilant to the threats on the internet. In the question 'What do you think that students need in order to become resilient to threats on the internet?' they were given more than one possible option to evaluate their opinion of students' needs for becoming more resilient to threats on the internet, with the possibility to add additional options. Three of the options given were sufficiently selected. However, two of them considered adding their additional options to this question. The majority of the responses, 32 or 71,1% indicated that according to them students need critical skills to access the internet. 18 or 40% of the respondents answered that students need better digital skills. Higher was the number of professors who think that students need skills for detection of fake news with 25 or 55.6% of the total respondents. The additional options added by the professors by their choice were that students need: regular trainings for digital literacy and that they need to use critical thinking skills.

What do you think students need in order to become resilient to threats on the internet? (You can choose more than one option)

Better digital skills — 18
Skills for detection of fake news — 25
Critical skills for internet access — 32
Regular trainings for digital literacy — 1
They need to use critical thinking skills whenever necessary. — 1

Figure 2. Professors' perceptions on the ways of building students' resilience

The Likert scale was employed to measure the respondents' approach to adding the Media and Information Literacy course to the university curricula. The majority of the respondents (46.6%) from whom 44.4% agreed completely and 42.2% simply agreed that the course should be added to the university curricula as one of the ways to make youth more resilient to disinformation. None of the respondents disagreed or completely disagreed.

44.4%
42.2%
13.3%

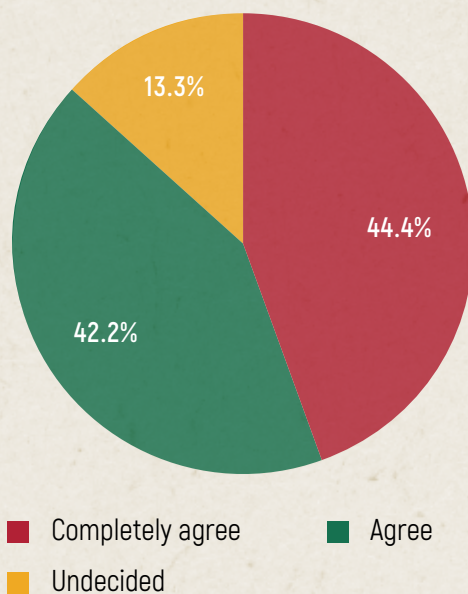■ Completely agree   ■ Agree
■ Undecided

Figure 3. Professors' perceptions on introducing MIL as a subject at the university curricula

To concretize the question about the professors' attitude on introduction of MIL, the respondents were asked if they think SEEU is the university that should precede this challenge for young people and offer elective courses such as Media and Information Literacy. The majority of the respondents completely agreed that the course should be added to the SEEU university curricula, and none of the respondents disagreed or completely disagreed.

8.9%
24.4%
66.7%

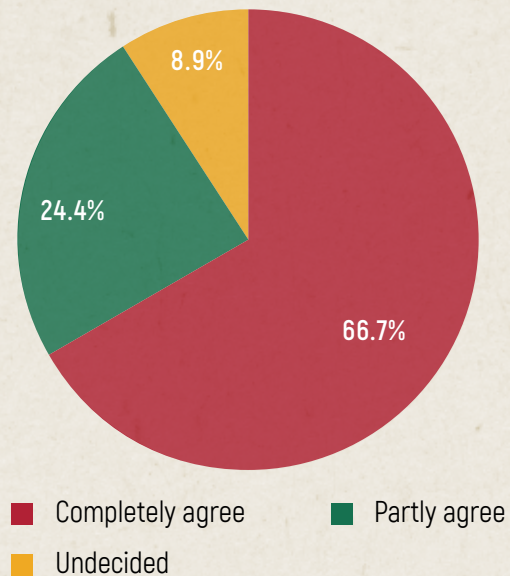■ Completely agree   ■ Partly agree
■ Undecided

Figure 4. Professors' perceptions on SEEU preceding the introduction of MIL education

The overall finding is that 93.3 percent of the SEEU academic staff who participated in the survey would support the initiative of introducing MIL as a subject in university curricula, with none of the respondents having 'No' as an answer.
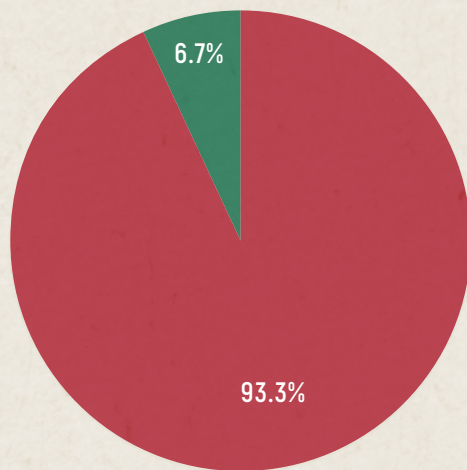
Figure 5. SEEU professors' support for MIL education initiative

Assessing students' perception for including Media and Information Literacy course at SEEU

The ***Questionnaire for Media and Information Literacy (students)*** was distributed to the undergraduate and master students of the South East European University (SEEU) through the group email. The questionnaire was organized starting with general to specific questions. The questionnaire was completed by 105 out of 1937 BA and 833 MA active students in the 2022/2023 academic year. The questionnaire was completed by 58 % females and 40 % males whereas 2 % didn't want to declare their gender. The questionnaire was completed mostly by the undergraduate students, 87.6 percent, and by fewer master students, 12.4 percent. Students of five SEEU faculties answered the questionnaire. The chart below (Figure 6) shows their representation in percentage. At a higher rate, the students from the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies answered the questionnaire (42.9 %), followed by the students from the LAW Faculty.
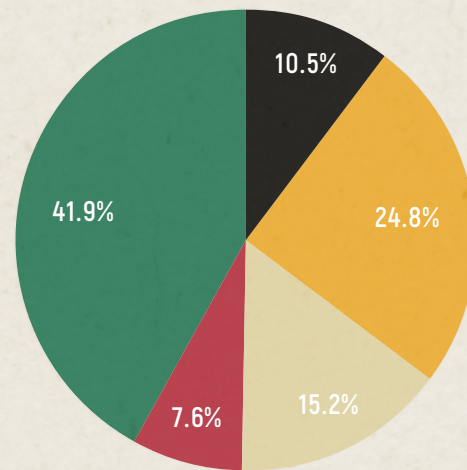
Figure 6. SEEU students' faculty representation

As expected, most of the students spend a lot of time on the internet daily, 2-7 hours a day is an option that was selected by 71.4 % of the respondents. Even though, most of the students 88.6 % think that there is often fake news on the internet. None of the students think that fake news is seldom or never on the internet, and only 11.4 % think that there are sometimes fake news on the internet.

Most of the students are confident that they have the necessary skills to deal with different manipulations on the internet presented in 64.8 %. Only 5.7 % think that they don't have the necessary skills to face the manipulations on the internet and 27.5 % don't know if they have the necessary skills. However, students expressed their perception about the need for being resilient to online threats and at a higher rate students think they need skills for identifying relevant sources on the internet, followed by skills for fake news detection and better digital skills and critical ability to access the internet in order to become resilient (see Figure 7 for results).

What do you think you need to be resilient to online threats? (You can select more than one option)

Better digital skills — 36.20%
Skills for fake news detection — 44.80%
Skills for identifying relevant sources on internet — 52.40%
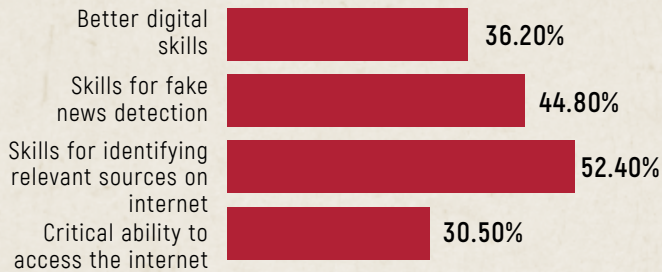Critical ability to access the internet — 30.50%

Figure 7. Students' perception for the need for resilience to online threats

For assessing their opinion if they would like to have the opportunity to develop skills to critically access the internet during their studies, the next question was included. 70 % of the students would like to have such an opportunity (see Figure 8).

Would you like to have the opportunity to develop skills to critical access internet during your studies?

21%
9.50%
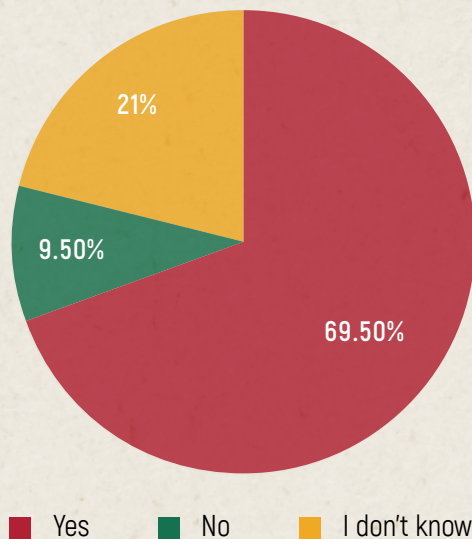69.50%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ I don't know

Figure 8. Students' perception for developing skills to critically access the internet

Moreover, 70.5 % of the students think that our university should do something to make students aware of these online threats. One of the ways to make students resilient to disinformation is to include the course in Media and Information Literacy in the university curricula. Most of the students agree with this and only 6.7 % do not agree (see Figure 9 for more detailed results).

Do you think that one of the ways to make you resilient to disinformation is to include the course of MIL in university curricula?

Strongly agree — 28.60%
Agree — 35.20%
Undecided — 29.50%
Disagree — 5.70%
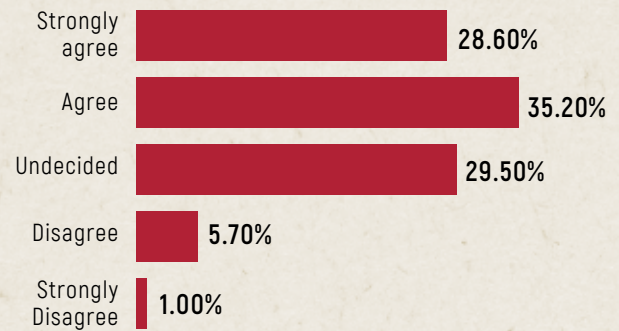Strongly Disagree — 1.00%

Figure 9. Students' perceptions for introducing MIL in University

The final close-ended question wants to assess student preference for choosing the course of Media and Information Literacy as an elective course when offered in the future. 55.2 % of the students would choose Media and Information Literacy as an elective course if offered in their respective faculty (Figure 10).

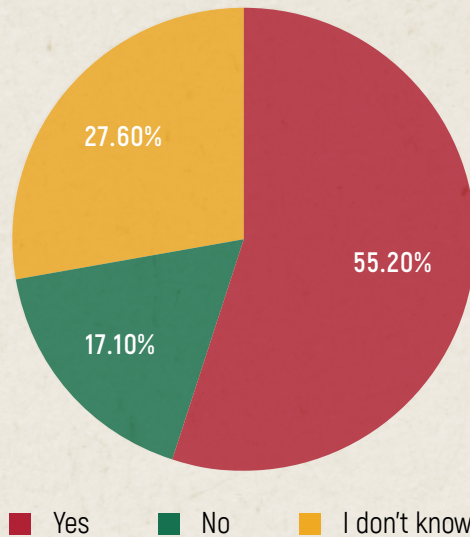**Would you choose Media and Information Literacy as an elective course in the faculty you are studying at?**

Figure 10. Students' perception for choosing MIL as an elective course

SEEU professors' and students' opinions for the Media and Information Literacy course

The consultative Questionnaire for the SEEU academic staff, and the Questionnaire for the SEEU students included one open question as a form of a qualitative assessment of their opinion on introducing the Media and Information Literacy course to the university curricula. In the section of 'Additional Comments', below we present some of the most relevant views of the academic staff:

'I think it is an extraordinary idea and of mutual benefit for all, especially for cultural diversity.'

'Every innovation for raising the awareness of the new generations as well as their preparation I consider valuable!'

'Media Education should be a mandatory course in the University.'

'I think the youth should be educated to select the information in social networks.'

'The subject is quite delicate, and this subject or at least one subject chapter should be processed in the first-year programs as soon as possible.'

Students were also very keen on giving their opinions about the relevance of becoming resilient through introducing this course in their curricula. Some of their views are presented below:

'I would choose it as an elective course, but we at the Faculty of Contemporary Sciences and Technologies have many hours a week, and now to add an extra hour is a bit too much.'

'Fake Internet news represents a great threat to the development of the critical opinion of students and professors. Anyone could fall for it at the risk of developing the wrong concept or point of view of how things work. Media and information literacy is a good way to reduce that risk.'

'Instead of using random blogs and social media for every bit of information people have to read full books and real studies if they want an unbiased opinion for the questions they have. A course that teaches how to properly read books and enjoy reading them would be far more effective in helping students learn how to gather information from the source as opposed to the secondhand biased information found online. Reading a book can help you form your own individualistic opinions on certain topics whereas with media you'll simply get recommended one side of the story which the algorithm will keep feeding you, and this will make it unable to leave the loop of disinformation and falsehood because you're not exposed to real dense information that benefits you but rather short, incomplete headlines written by people who want to make money and who are incompetent to make the claims they make. A course based on the Mortimer J. Adler book

called How to Read a Book could be of help to students throughout their life and during their academic careers…'

'It's worth it because now life hits us with news everywhere, like on the phone, on the TV, like in the rumors in our life, every day we are surrounded by a lot of fake news. I have come across this month and heard about many people who think they are earning from the phone by working online and then they are asked for some personal data that everyone sends to withdraw their money and that information is sold on the "dark web"…I think that fake news has affected our lives. We also need to know how much we should trust the internet.'

Future research

Ways and modalities of MIL education implementation and course content remain objects of exploration in future research which could take place after the first year of the implementation of MIL education in South East European University, but not only. Comparative research with the implementation of MIL education in other higher education institutions in North Macedonia would be of an added value to future collaborative research in the field.

4) CONCLUSIONS

Universities are promoters of the changes that take place in every society, particularly of innovative ideas, which are often characterized as revolutionary. They are the models that are followed and that create behavioral trends in society. Universities have the right infrastructure, enthusiasm, and suitable environments to generate, but also implement concrete solutions, which are much easier to implement in the community. They are the main accelerators of many social changes and drafters of many policies that have been im-

plemented and are currently implemented in certain countries, but also globally. Having said this, living in the disinformation age, the role of the universities becomes more crucial in educating a generation who is professionally equipped to face information challenges as well as to promote critical thinking in each step as a democratic value of a resilient society. Media and Information Literacy nowadays represents an essential life skill to evaluate information critically and to be able to make informed decisions.

South East European University is perceived by its students and staff as a unique academic and scientific environment, because it incorporates interdisciplinary study programs, local and international background frameworks, scientific and research institutes, and students coming from the Southeast European region and beyond. This environment transforms the institution into an important factor in dealing with important topics that have an impact on society. For some time now, SEEU has proven itself as a model for the implementation of new trends in higher education and it has been a pioneer of many initiatives in the field of higher education. MIL being one of them. Since 2019 SEEU, through its research institute Max van der Stoel has established the Media Literacy and Disinformation Research Cluster under the Social Sciences Group conducting research projects on this interdisciplinary field. The cluster has also been the promoter of the idea of Media Information Literacy education as a way of building resilient students able to fight disinformation.

This research has justified the initiative for the introduction of Media and Information Literacy as an elective course for students of every faculty at South East European University and showed the significance of introducing this course through SEEU professors' and students' perceptions.

Data from the staff questionnaire (n=45) suggest that the majority of academic staff members across all SEEU faculties and institutes perceive Media and Information Literacy education as one of the ways to make youth resilient to disinforma-

tion. Moreover, the student questionnaire (n=105) revealed similar results. SEEU students stated their desire for the introduction of Media and Information Literacy as an elective course in their curricula, as one of the best ways to become resilient to disinformation on the internet.

From the findings and results from both questionnaires as well as their opinions stated in the open section one can conclude that there is a suitable environment for the implementation of the MIL in the SEEU curricula. Majority of students stated their desire for the introduction of Media Literacy and Information as an elective course in their curricula, as one of the best ways to become resilient to disinformation on the internet. The results from the questionnaire with the SEEU academic staff supported students' perceptions regarding their need to develop skills that will help them to deal with different manipulations on the internet as a way to become resilient to online threats. Moreover, the participation and their supportive attitudes of the staff management of SEEU is an important indicator for ensuring the successful implementation of the MIL education in SEEU as well as its long-term sustainability in the future.

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