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**Media and Information Literacy (MIL). An issue of freedom of expression
in the digital age. Ulla Carlsson, presentation Global MIL Week**

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Colleagues, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Around the world, citizens are struggling to bring about an internet that is open, free and safe – that is, to abolish surveillance, control, censorship, hate speech and threats. In some instances, politicians and civil society organizations are calling for government measures to help them achieve these goals. In other countries authoritarian regimes use internet and social media to justify repression, including measures to limit freedom of expression. The powers of state and private interests combine to silence free speech. We see that internet can have quite different impacts on the social order.

In this context we should also bear in mind that nearly half of humanity lacks internet access - in many cases due to poverty, social injustice, gender discrimination, ethnic or religious discrimination, unemployment – it is about a lack of access to information and knowledge – an exclusion from the digital media and communication system.

Many states have active cyber operations for offensive and defensive actions - to attack another nation's computers or information networks through, for example, computer viruses, denial-of-service attacks, misinformation and disinformation. Reports of malicious and targeted cyberattacks are becoming increasingly common around the world.

It is not easy to gain an overview of the cyberworld that confronts citizens today.

From a global north perspective we could assume that we are now at a point that may be described as “the end of the digital beginning”. Following a period of optimism, not to say euphoria, about the potentialities internet offered – not least hopes for increasing citizen engagement and participation – problems have become apparent. The media ecology has changed, and the public sphere is transformed – a serious challenge from a democratic

perspective.

These changes are taking place within socioeconomic orders that are in flux. In many places changing political, social and economic landscapes, characterized by growing inequality and polarization, mean that societal institutions are facing challenges when they are unable to respond satisfactorily to citizens' needs. The changes are linked to long-term processes, which in many cases have been geared more to market strategies than to the common good.

These processes in turn raise issues about what democracy is, and what it should be. Core democratic virtues are called into consideration - such as 'freedom of expression', 'inclusion', 'participation' - in short: human rights as the international guide to democratic polity/order.

The complexities of modern society demand educated, skilled, communicative and reflective citizens in many different areas if democracy and social progress are to be maintained and developed. Critical understanding are more urgent than ever. Some of the knowledge and skills required relate to media and communication culture.

In the age of digital communication and information everybody need to think critically about how different media work, how they represent the society and the world, how they earn their money, how they are produced and used - how people communicate.

Therefore, media and information literacy, MIL, takes its place alongside other things people need in order to be informed, engaged and empowered citizens: It is about 'democratic learning' as a part of general education and everyday life.

But it has its value only when it is combined with basic knowledge of core subjects as civics, history, native language, religion, foreign languages and mathematics - which implies good schools for all - girls and boys, women and men - with competent teachers and sufficient funding.

Most observers agree that MIL is a key resource - a citizens' right. Providing this resource involves life-long learning, both in the classroom and beyond. The need for a comprehensive and coherent educational approach is urgent. Because MIL is crucial to the function of democracy, present and future, and it requires concerted policy as well as constructive incentives to learning and civic participation.

The many changes in the media and communication system are largely the work of a kind of influential transnational actors like Google and Facebook. These companies with their digital platforms have evolved into economic and socio-cultural phenomena with power to transform the relationships between technology, capital, content and users.

Facebook is by far the most powerful media and communication company in the world today, with more than two billion recurrent users. The power over users resides in the companies' ability to alter algorithms and the terms of service without transparency. It might be described as a

monopoly on information, for which users pay with their personal data. This information is then used to for example target advertising, shopping patterns, guiding political messaging in general elections and even terrorism.

A consequence of Google's and Facebook's dominance on the advertising market is that traditional media companies – as newspapers, and particularly local papers – have suffered a marked decline in advertising revenue. Less revenue impacts on their ability to offer quality journalism – which in turn impoverishes public discourse.

This new media environment has opened the doors to views and objectives that otherwise would not become so widely known – as for example hate speech and threats. The risk of being exposed to misinformation and manipulation has never been greater. New ideas about freedom of expression come into play. Clearly, the balance between personal privacy, security and reliability is of crucial importance in this digital world.

The vast quantity of information from an ever-greater diversity of sources leads to greater disparity of media use between different groups of citizens. There is concern about the social cohesion that underpins democratic rule - how it is being challenged by individuals' and groups' need to assert their identities and views. Some researchers argue that misinformation and disinformation are drivers of political polarization.

As a consequence gaps open up in terms of knowledge and participation, which in turn may weaken social cohesion and increase inequality between social classes. Digital inequality becomes an important element in the broader and ever-present issues of social equality, gender equality and social justice.

Issues like these are important when societies enter into periods of rapid and comprehensive change. Societies worldwide are in flux today; ideas about the future are increasingly uncertain.

The problems we face are complex and, furthermore, partly interwoven: climate and environmental change, the effects of financial deregulation and integration, corruption, economic and social inequality – war, conflicts, terrorism, large numbers of refugees, growing nationalism and populist politics – often with infringements of human rights. The risk of political turbulence and economic instability is a concern worldwide.

Human experience tells us that although new technologies almost always bring significant benefits, they also bring risks. Often we tend to make ourselves dependent on them without first having asked for what purposes. That the technology exists is itself an argument for using it. Users' knowledge of the media, its role and the rules it imposes, is based on how the media environment – in the present day the digital media environment – has been structured and how it is regulated.

The structure of the market, with companies like Google and Facebook, and its relation to

national, regional and international legislation and the media market is in focus. It is in the realm of public policy, that the problems have to be confronted. Only today we are beginning to formulate ideas about how national legislation - and international agreements - can, and should, be applied to powerful market actors. Now calls are heard for policies to resolve these problems.

The challenge is to develop ‘policies’ that balance the dual goals of maximizing the opportunities, and minimizing the risks inherent in the digital media and internet culture. And, to do this without impinging on freedom of expression and other human rights.

At the national level, the state – parliaments, governments and legislative bodies - can make laws and ordinances to bolster public confidence in institutions to achieve legitimacy.

Media and information literacy (MIL) is often emphasized in the face of technological breakthroughs, when policy and law-makers find themselves unable to tackle emerging problems. When regulatory measures seem impossible, education is often touted as the solution – sometimes without any clear idea of the objective, pedagogic or otherwise. In such situations MIL may simply relieve policy-makers of having to address more difficult problems that arise behind an increasingly commercialized media culture.

Therefore, a national MIL policy has to be carefully considered – as such a policy is necessary for success. A policy that can effectively deal with a problem requires first a definition/a clarification and understanding of the problem at hand before searching for relevant responses - and then assessing how the proposed solution fits with other policy and objectives. In the present case, the question is how MIL squares with other efforts to enhance freedom of expression and human rights – in extension, how it contributes to social progress, equality – not least gender equality - and democratic development.

But, today, when governments are being squeezed by the market and an accentuating financialization, the scope for action is limited. In such a situation progress requires constructive collaboration. The MIL issue is broad and involves many different actors.

That is why efforts will require extensive collaboration between the affected sectors organized according to a suitable and effective ‘multistakeholder governance model’ – within an accountable national political framework. Besides policy-makers, it may include schools, adult education organizations, higher education, media companies, internet content providers, libraries, museums, the research community and not least, civil society.

No doubt that combining extensive collaboration with a responsive and accountable political leadership is a challenge - without political overbearance and moralizing admonishments.

Only given a holistic view, with the interplay of, and synergies between, these actors and their activities will MIL be able to produce informed, communicative, engaged and empowered citizens who, in turn, contribute to the diversity and inclusiveness of the media and communication culture.

The worst thing that can happen in a democracy is if citizens become indifferent and unconcerned. Arguments should clash and be weighed against one another. Only then can citizens resolve their differences in a civilized manner.

Such a holistic view requires a widespread conviction in the society that

- *first*, all members of society, regardless of class, gender, race, ethnicity, should have equal opportunity to make their voices heard in the public conversation /the public sphere, regardless of channel or platform;
- *second*, political and legal frameworks must be examined in detail and, if necessary, amended to accommodate to digital realities, without impinging on fundamental principles of freedom of expression or other human rights;
- *thirdly*, media companies have to strengthen their systems for maintaining self-regulation and ethics, the profession of journalism needs to reinforce its efforts to earn people's trust, and to maintain their standards of quality and credibility; business models have to adapt to digital reality, finding viable sources of revenue and developing effective distribution models;
- *fourth*, internet platforms need to develop transparent statements of mission – and work with civil society, news providers and policy-makers to increase transparency, trust, ethics and accountability; and finally
- civil society organizations need to develop their roles in the cause of defending freedom of expression, freedom of information and personal privacy within the framework of universal human rights.

It is important to underline that Media and Information Literacy (MIL) not alone can solve all the fundamental problems in the media and communication culture. MIL should be understood as part of a whole that includes legislation and reforms in media, education and other fields of relevance. It is a long-term benefit, not a short-term solution.

Any country that has made a commitment to develop a national policy for MIL has to proceed according to its circumstances and capacity, its governmental structure, its media landscape and educational infrastructure. With a proper infrastructure in place, countries can learn from one another's experiences – which can also contribute to a strengthening of freedom of expression

and social progress in less democratic countries.

Digital communication systems today are in many respects global in scope. To be effective, measures need to stretch far beyond national frontiers. When informal governance increases, and transnational actors maintain and augment their power, the ability of national governments to influence and regulate their activities falls short of the mark.

The defense of freedom of expression and other human rights is a matter of effective governance as well as fruitful collaboration models on national, regional and global levels. The interaction between national and international bodies needs to be improved.

The future of internet is highly uncertain. And calls for social institutions to regulate internet are heard worldwide – such calls also have to include media and information literacy.

This is why international, transnational institutions and multistakeholder collaboration, in short global governance, is necessary. It has for example to be the essential modus operandi in UNESCO's implementation of the Agenda 2030, and especially target 16.10 about ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

New hardware and new kinds of transnational companies will see the light of day. Now Artificial intelligence and robotization pose challenges to societies already caught up in ongoing processes of political, social and economic change. The issues new developments raise are urgent and make even more serious demands of media and information literacy in a public sphere and citizens perspective.

Media policy is formed at national, regional and international levels. It is important that all levels agree that developing citizens' media and information literacy is vital to protecting and promoting freedom of expression. It is about a vital society dialogue and political leadership with accountability, for a more equal, fair and safer world.

And more: Without learning and knowledge development MIL is not possible to realize. The development of knowledge can help resolve broader issues and systematic problems in society, including the media sector, digitization and MIL. In order for MIL policies and activities to be effective, the problems they address must first be analysed and clearly specified in a broad context of knowledge on a scientific basis.

There is an urgent need to gain a better understanding of the meaning and consequences of globalization and digitization from the point of view of citizens and media. While these factors are far broader and not directly related to MIL, their impacts on MIL are both direct and strong. And broader collaboration across boundaries in coordinated studies that produce comparable results is essential in fields like media and MIL, where research is conducted in many different disciplines. It has never been easy to find funding for interdisciplinary and transnational research,

but it is even more difficult today.

Furthermore, words rather than images and sounds continue to get most attention, even though visual content occupy such a central position in contemporary media culture.

Even in research there is a need for holistic perspectives and transparency. But, a host of factors in academic research – the incessant struggle to find funding, the pressure to publish quickly with an ever-greater specialization – militate against holistic approaches.

Current research sometimes presents contradictory results regarding the direction and quality of the digital transformation process. Once in a while, there could be a risk that such a situation may aggravate an already normatively loaded debate on the effects of the digitization of media.

And more - but not least. When media and information literacy (MIL) is discussed in global arenas it is important to be aware of the dominance of the northern hemisphere. Concepts relating to media and communication are often seen with eyes that have been conditioned by analytical categories developed predominantly within the Anglo-American sphere.

These categories have then been applied to other, different social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Such a hegemonic perception has become prevalent all over the world. So, there is a need for researchers, experts and policy makers to transcend cultural, political, ethnic and religious boundaries and to accommodate regional variations, to a much greater extent than is done today. This is an enormous challenge even for topics like media and information literacy (MIL).

The challenge for the researchers is not only to explain the problems, but also to communicate with the people in power so that research findings will make a difference. To dare engage in debates on democracy, social change, human rights, freedom of expression – and the role of media and information literacy in relation to these fundamental values.

The thoughts presented in this address can be said to be the base for the publication you have received in the conference bag – Understanding Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Age. A Question of Democracy. It contains presentations about current knowledge, politics and policies, practices and also reflections.

The book consists of three parts. In the first and the third parts, a number of articles of a more general nature discuss media and information literacy (MIL) as well as courses of development on national, regional and global levels. The focus in the second part is on Sweden. The articles in this part present current research findings, policy decisions, political initiatives and some examples of 'best practices'.

It is my hope that the different chapters in this book will contribute to knowledge development - and learning - in the area as well as to discussions and reflections on the role of MIL in contemporary societies. It is also my hope that the examples from research, politics and practices

in Sweden will stimulate initiatives and activities in other countries, and particularly exchanges of knowledge and experiences between many countries all over the world.

So, read, reflect and discuss... hopefully some of the content can inspire this conference.

Finally, more than ever we need international platforms as UNESCO's Global media and Information Literacy Week Conference where MIL representatives with different backgrounds from all regions of the world meet for knowledge exchange and discussions – in an uncertain time as now we have to regain consensus on a united humanity that shares a common future and global accountability regarding freedom of expression and other universal human rights.

Because, today this idea seems to have breaking down. Stéphane Hessel, one of the people behind the Declaration of Human Rights 1948 - he reminded us eight years ago, when he was 93 years old, in the essay *Indignez-vous* of the importance of standing up for the cause of justice and solidarity – of the necessity, time and again, to defend our rights and freedoms – in particular freedom of expression. Media and information literacy is crucial to that effort.

Thank you!

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