Shaping Political Subjectivity through Media and Information Literacy: A Critical Discourse Study of EAVI's Project

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This article calls for an investigation of the way media and information literacy (MIL) projects construct and (de)legitimize particular forms of political subjectivity. The authors argue that the field of critical discourse studies (CDS) offers useful approaches to develop this line of inquiry. They demonstrate this point in a case study of the MIL project of the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI). The authors work with a concept of discourse understood as a performative articulatory practice, grounded in linguistic pragmatics and poststructuralist discourse theory. The article provides a qualitative discourse analysis of the way EAVI articulates MIL signifiers with specific concepts of critique and citizenship. The analysis shows that EAVI's discourse promotes a holistic transformation of the self into an informed, reflexive and critical entity, as well as a type of society that is inclusive, cohesive and participatory. EAVI is also decidedly pro-EU and opposed to nationalist projects.

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This article calls for an investigation of the way media and information literacy (MIL) projects (de)legitimize particular forms of subjectivity and society. It argues for a reflexive attitude with respect to the way MIL concepts get articulated and operationalized in MIL projects. Even though the academic literature on MIL is booming, hardly any research has been conducted on the discursive construction of MIL concepts and projects.

We argue that the field of critical discourse studies (CDS) offers a particularly useful set of approaches in order to develop such a metaperspective on MIL. CDS theories and methods do not only provide relevant tools for fostering critical forms of MIL, they can also be deployed in research on MIL projects themselves, as they allow for an investigation of MIL as an object of knowledge and practice discursively constituted through a multiplicity of communicative practices. As such, CDS allows researchers to explore the political implications of MIL projects. This is important because MIL is not only about "literacy" but also often about "critique" and "citizenship". Many MIL projects have an implicit or explicit societal mission and therefore an ideological dimension that merits critical attention.

This article focuses specifically on the way the signifiers "critique" and "citizenship" get articulated with(in) the MIL project of the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI). Based on a notion of discourse defined as a performative articulatory practice, we ask what forms of political subjectivity are being constructed through EAVI's discourse about "media literacy", "critique" and "citizenship". Our analysis shows that EAVI articulates a discourse oriented towards a holistic transformation of the self into an informed, reflexive and critical entity. At the same time, EAVI's MIL project advocates a type of democratic society that is inclusive, cohesive, participatory and particularly pro-EU. An in-depth discussion of the theoretical and methodological issues that arise when analyzing MIL projects from a CDS perspective can be found in Zienkowski & Patriarche (in press).

1.   MIL as a disputed discursive field

If we are to understand the dense articulation of MIL-related concepts in EAVI documents, we need to start by recognizing the heterogeneity of the MIL discursive field. The EAVI project is located in a field where competing discourses clash over the meaning of signifiers such as "critique" and "citizenship", as well as over the concept of MIL

itself. It is therefore important to contextualize EAVI's MIL project in the wider MIL debate. In order to do so, we reviewed the academic MIL literature, focusing on keywords such as "citizenship", "democracy" and "critical" as these relate closely to our focus on political subjectivity. This review suggests that the tensions concerning the meaning of such concepts crystallize around two main axes: (1) an axis constituted by critical and non-critical approaches to MIL; and (2) an axis constituted by the contrast between holistic and utilitarian approaches to MIL.

1.1.   MIL in the minefield of the debates on critique

In the academic literature on MIL, a first axis around which debates develop centers on the notion of critique. In MIL literature, "critique" is mostly used as an adjective, as in "critical awareness", "critical understanding" and "critical thinking". Such terms are often used interchangeably (Landry & Roussel, 2018) and may refer to attitudes, pedagogies, situations or action capabilities, depending on the research perspective (Fastrez & Philippette, 2017). This is to say that the notion of critique is a theoretical and ideological minefield, not only in MIL discourse but also in the humanities and social sciences at large (for further discussion, see Fastrez & Philippette, 2017). It is worth noting that the debates on critique have implications for the notion of citizenship located at the core of many MIL projects: as the meaning of "critical" changes, so does the meaning of "citizenship".

We identified four stances with respect to the notion of critique in academic MIL literature. First, some academics prefer to avoid the notion of critique in discussions of MIL. For instance, Potter (2019) explicitly rejects the signifier "critical thinking" because of its fuzziness. He conceptualizes media literacy as a set of cognitive activities performed by individual receivers with mental "hardware" and "software".

Second, when the term "critique" is used, it is often left undefined and only acquires a more specific meaning in relation to a concrete activity or task. For instance, in an early article discussing the concept of media literacy, Fastrez (2010) implicitly defined "critical" in relation to the practice of searching and evaluating information sources as the capacity to broaden one's range of information sources, to adapt one's online search routines, and to evaluate the quality of information sources.

Third, some academics advocate an explicitly defined notion of critique, drawing on a rather diverse set of theoretical, epistemological and even ontological frameworks. For instance, many cognitively oriented MIL scholars rely on a cognitive conceptualization of critical thinking, aptly summarized by Halpern: "Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal-directed [...]" (Halpern, 2014, quoted in Landry & Roussel, 2018, pp. 36-37). Another example of an explicitly defined – and rather interdisciplinary – notion of critique is provided by Fastrez and Philippette (2017). The authors argue that critique is not only about reading and evaluating media messages. Neither is it exclusively about negotiating social relations with the actors involved. Critique is also a matter of co-production and technologies.

Finally, certain MIL scholars establish strong boundaries between what they consider to be critical and non-critical (or a-critical) forms of MIL (e.g. Higdon, 2020). They do so by drawing on "critical" or "radical" philosophies, which understand critique as involving an awareness of the inequalities, discriminations, ideologies and power relations in society. For instance, Higdon (2020) explicitly defines "media literacy" (ML) as the ability to recognize and problematize ideologies embedded in media. His understanding of critique is theoretically grounded in the works of Stuart Hall and Max Horkheimer. For him ML is therefore part and parcel of a broader "pedagogy of resistance and liberation" (Higdon 2020, p. 12). Kellner and Share (2005) go even further and argue that ML should empower people to create media, raise alternative or oppositional voices, and contribute to social activism.

CDS also embrace such "critical" or "radical" philosophies. From a CDS perspective, one therefore needs to distinguish between politicized and depoliticized (or depoliticizing) notions of MIL. More specifically, a distinction has to be made between approaches that explicitly recognize that all forms of MIL (re)produce ideas and norms regarding power relations, and approaches that consider MIL as a politically neutral set of tools and practices. The discussions of critique in MIL studies thus run parallel to discussions of critique in CDS.

1.2. *MIL in holistic and utilitarian media policies*

Researchers analyzing EU media policies have identified a tension between a "holistic" approach to MIL on the one hand, and a "functio-

nalistic" or utilitarian approach to MIL on the other hand (e.g. Trültzsch-Wijnen *et al.*, 2017). In holistic approaches, MIL is constructed as a set of (critical) competences required for citizenship and therefore links up with notions of participation and "living together" (Landry & Roussel, 2018). In utilitarian approaches, MIL comes to be understood as a set of operational skills that matter to employment and competitiveness. In EU media policies, utilitarian approaches enter into conflict with holistic approaches. The gradual displacement of the signifier "media literacy" by notions such as "digital literacy" and "digital skills" is symptomatic of an increasing stress on MIL as a matter of technical know-how (Trültzsch-Wijnen *et al.*, 2017).

Drawing on CDS literature, Drotner and co-authors (2017) interpret this tension as the result of a "neoliberal" shift that contributes to the constitution of "self-governing individuals". Referring to Rizvi, they explain that neoliberal MIL and education "produce new kinds of subjectivities: people become lifelong learners who need to be able to work creatively, to be flexible, adjustable and mobile […]" (Drotner *et al.*, 2017, p. 270). The authors also note that this neoliberal discourse does not remain uncontested: 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" (Drotner *et al.*, 2017, p. 269). As these discourses compete and/or intersect in policy circles, the notion of citizenship gets rearticulated as well.

The two axes discussed above demarcate the open and fluctuating boundaries of the MIL problematic as articulated by academic and policy discourses. Within this field, the meanings of MIL-related signifiers such as "critique" and "citizenship" get fixed within discourses competing for hegemony. In our study, we will elucidate how EAVI positions itself in this debate, thereby promoting a particular mode of political subjectivity.

2.   EAVI as a case

We chose the MIL project of the European Association for Viewers Interest (EAVI) as a case for our CDS. On its website, EAVI introduces itself as "an international non-profit organization registered in Brussels which advocates media literacy and full citizenship" (European Association for Viewers Interests [EAVI], 2017c). EAVI's main objective is to support "the adoption of initiatives that enable citizens to read,

write and participate in public life through the media". The association also seeks to "develop and disseminate best practices in media use" and "forward the interests of citizens by engaging the EU institutions as media policy stakeholders" (EAVI, 2017c). The establishment of EAVI has been supported by the European Commission (EC) with the goal "to facilitate the unifying process of all those who support citizens' and consumers' interests in the field of media" (EAVI, 2017c).

While EAVI tends to use the signifier "media literacy" in order to describe its goals and practices, it also uses notions such as "digital literacy", "data literacy", "information literacy" or "statistical literacy". Even though EAVI does not use the acronym MIL, we use this acronym as an umbrella term in order to capture the heterogeneous set of competences, forms of awareness, and practices that EAVI seeks to foster.

There are several reasons why EAVI is a relevant case for studying the political and ideological dimensions of MIL projects. First, EAVI explicitly positions itself not only as a promoter of media literacy but also as a facilitator of citizenship, as is explicitly expressed through its slogan "Media literacy for citizenship". Second, EAVI is involved in a wide range of MIL initiatives, engaging with and (re)producing MIL discourses at the crossroads of research, pedagogy, and media policy. Thirdly, the pragmatic consideration that all EAVI documents are published in English, and the fact that these documents are easily accessible online, also influenced our decision to focus on this case.

3.   A CDS perspective on EAVI's MIL project

Our analysis of EAVI's MIL project is based on a concept of discourse grounded in poststructuralist discourse theory and linguistic pragmatics. Below we will provide a brief outline of this combined approach, as well as a discussion of the way we constructed, coded and analyzed our dataset.

3.1.   MIL as a performative articulatory practice

There is a wide range of CDS approaches, each based on more or less specific epistemological, conceptual and methodological foundations (see Angermuller *et al.*, 2014; Wodak, 2013). In the present study, our notion of discourse borrows from poststructuralist Essex-style discourse theory and linguistic pragmatics (see Zienkowski, 2017).

Essex-style discourse theory provides a useful framework to think about the way semiotic elements get linked together in and through discourse. Such *articulatory practices* fix the meanings of signifiers, identities and ideologies in always tentative and provisional ways. Whenever two or more semiotic elements are being articulated with each other, their meanings get modified in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. As we produce and (re)articulate discourse, we engage in vain but productive attempts to establish the boundaries (for interpreting the meaning) of statements, identities and societies (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Zienkowski, 2017).

Linguistic pragmatics draws our attention to discourse as a matter of (multimodal) language use (Verschueren, 1999). More firmly anchored in linguistics than in political philosophy, it is an approach that does not merely consider language as a phenomenon whereby human beings link discursive elements, but also analyzes these articulations as *performative* practices. It is an approach that is well suited to analyze the way discursive practices performatively change the world in which we live (Zienkowski, 2017).

Drawing on both Essex-style discourse theory and linguistic pragmatics, we define MIL discourse as a multimodal practice of articulation. The semiotic elements that get linked performatively to each other through articulatory practices belong to all levels of the discursive structure. In audiovisual material for instance, linguistic elements, images, narratives, non-verbal communicative acts, and identities, get articulated with each other. In doing so, the meanings of the articulated elements get temporarily fixed – and so does the subjectivity of those engaging in these articulatory practices.

Subjectivity can be understood as a way of relating oneself to (discursive) reality. It is a phenomenon that emerges as a result of our imperfect reflexive awareness of the discourses, practices and processes that constitute our sense of self. Selfhood is thereby considered in terms of "a reification of the processes that allow us to position ourselves as more or less coherent minds and/or bodies in relation to spatial, temporal, social and (inter)textual aspects of reality" (Zienkowski, 2017, p. 407). Discourse provides human beings with the resources to performatively and reflexively relate themselves to themselves and to the world. As such, it is constitutive of our very sense of self.

There is an ideological dimension to all forms of subjectivity, as our sense of self is always at least partly informed by internalized discourses and power relations (Mansfeld, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium,

2000; Zienkowski, 2017). This dimension is rather explicit in statements about the way EAVI would like citizens to position themselves ideologically in the public sphere. It is also at play in statements about the relation between citizens, media and other institutions, as well as in statements about the importance of MIL to the way EU democracies are (or ought to be) organized and function.

3.2.   *Data collection, coding and discourse analysis*

A first issue to deal with in delimiting our dataset (see Patriarche & Zienkowski, in press) is the fact that EAVI's project unfolds on multiple platforms (websites, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). We were in search of material that would allow us to investigate the diverse ways EAVI articulates and fixes the meaning of "media literacy" in relation to "critique" and "citizenship". We therefore decided to focus on EAVI's main website as it contains different types and genres of documents with such articulations (e.g. video cartoons, MIL tests, infographics, news-like reports, best practice guides, lesson plans, manifestos, and so on).

The data collection took place between the 27th of November and the 30th of December 2020. We navigated the five menus of EAVI's website ("Home", "Blog", "Resources", "Partners" and "Other activities") and downloaded all documents including at least one occurrence of the terms "media literacy" (and related ones such as "digital literacy", "data literacy", etc.), "citizenship" (also "civic", "civil", "democracy" and "democratic") or "critique" (mostly in the adjective form "critical"). Regarding the EAVI blog, we decided to collect all the relevant posts published in 2020 and 2019, in order to include a broad spectrum of subjects (2020 was largely focused on COVID-19 issues). In addition, we included four videos produced by EAVI. These four videos, titled *A Journey to media literacy*, are particularly relevant as they present EAVI's MIL project in a very explicit way. We created time-stamped transcripts of the videos in order to facilitate coding and analysis. Videos of other actors that are published on the EAVI website were not included as part of the dataset. This resulted in a dataset containing 70 documents.

We used the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Dedoose in order to facilitate the identification, the categorization and the visualization of our data. As a first step, we uploaded our dataset into Dedoose and identified text segments containing expli-

cit articulations of the notions we were interested in: citizenship (e.g. signifiers such as "citizenship", "citizen", or "citizenry"); civicness/ civility (e.g. signifiers such as "civil society" or "civic organization"); critique (e.g. signifiers "critical" or "critically"); literacy (containing sub-codes such as "media literacy", "data literacy", "visual literacy" or "statistical literacy"). In a second step, we inductively coded all text segments for implicit and explicit definitions or descriptions of MIL, critique and citizenship. In a third step, the definitions and descriptions were grouped together at a higher level of abstraction. These codes were applied to the texts and time-stamped video transcripts. The time-stamps allowed us to take the visuals of the EAVI videos into account in the discourse analysis.

While coding is a useful step for identifying and categorizing relevant segments of discourse, it does not constitute a discourse study in itself. It is a preparatory step for an analysis of the interpretive and ideological functions that signifiers perform, in relation to each other, as well as in relation to specific social and political projects, within and across documents. The analyst has to render explicit the performative relationships – i.e., functions – that structure the data under investigation. This can be done by formulating empirically grounded answers to questions such as: What function(s) does the articulation of the signifier "critical" perform in relation to EAVI's preferred mode of subjectivity in this particular document? The interpretive analytical work consists in rendering the logics that underpin complex networks of statements explicit, on the basis of empirically observable discursive patterns. In this paper, we analyzed the interpretive functions of coded MIL statements in relation to the type of political subjectivity EAVI has in mind for EU citizens. A more detailed outline of this heuristic can be found in Zienkowski and Patriarche (in press).

4.   EAVI's preferred type of political subjectivity

This section will analyze the type of political subjectivity promoted through EAVI's MIL project as it emerges across the documents. We will proceed in three steps: first we will characterize the ideal-typical (sense of) self constructed by EAVI, then we will draw attention to EAVI's framing of media literacy as a transformative journey, and finally we will focus on the ideal type of society that EAVI has in mind for the EU and its members.

4.1.   *MIL as promoting an ideal-typical (sense of) self*

Our transversal analysis of the dataset shows that EAVI's MIL discourse is constitutive of an ideal-typical (sense of) self involving: (1) a holistic conceptualization of the self; (2) an "informed" and "responsible" mode of citizenship; (3) a reflexive form of "awareness"; and (4) a "critical" mode of subjectivity.

First, EAVI considers MIL to be a holistic project that transcends the development of media-related skills. It is holistic in at least two ways. First, EAVI promotes a notion of MIL that combines knowledge, skills and attitudes. The voice-over in one of the EAVI videos states that "technical skills are necessary to be media literate, but we also need the ability to make choices and to evaluate the consequences of our actions. Being aware of what we are doing and how we are using the media leads to mastery and freedom to make the most of the fantastic opportunities new technology offers" (EAVI, 2017b). Being "aware" (of "hidden interests", of filter bubbles, of one's own limitations, etc.), remaining focused, using the media "safely", evaluating the consequences of one's actions – all these constituents of EAVI's MIL project are not reducible to skills. Thus while EAVI prefers using the signifier "skills" instead of "competencies", it rearticulates the notion of skills in a way that encompasses knowledge and attitudes, thereby distancing itself (at least partially) from a narrow understanding of "digital skills" (see 1.2).

Besides, the MIL project promoted by EAVI is also holistic in the sense that it deals with (the empowerment and wellbeing of) the *entire* self. The holistic notion of MIL operationalized by EAVI implies that "becoming media literate" has implications for the individual as a whole and not merely for his or her media-related competences. The fact that EAVI does not use the signifier "competence" might actually be an indication that EAVI's project aims at transforming the entire self. MIL is sometimes considered to be relevant for "personal branding" and employability, but more often it is constructed as essential for the development of "well-being", "citizenship" and a "healthy" democratic society. In that respect as well EAVI seems to partially resist the tendency of EU policies to define MIL primarily in terms of utilitarian skills (see 1.2).

A second feature of EAVI's ideal-typical (sense of) self is its desire for an "informed" and "responsible" subjectivity, which is a precondition for "active" and "full" citizenship. The signifier "awareness"

is often used in a similar way as "informed", in relation to external factors and phenomena such as: "hidden forces" in the media; "how data are intentionally skewed to foster particular interests"; "media misrepresenting minorities"; "mediatized oversimplifications and scapegoating"; "the agenda setting function of the media"; "filter bubbles"; "negative effects of media on society"; and "propaganda".

Third, the MIL project of EAVI implies a reflexive form of "awareness" or "consciousness", in the sense that it is at least partially oriented towards one's own media use, behavior, and interpretations (see Fastrez & Philippette, 2017). MIL does not simply require an awareness of media messages and processes, as outlined in the paragraph above. It also implies self-knowledge and a care for the self. For instance, a blog contributor argues for the development of "emotional and metacognitive skills", which would enable us to use media "intentionally" and "to think about our own thought processes and those of others" (EAVI, 2020c).

EAVI seeks to promote at least two types of reflexivity. The first type implies an awareness of the way media shape our lives. MIL can help us to become aware of our dependency on media and of the control that media exert on us. For instance, the goal of the 2019 EAVI Summer camp was to develop "the participants' critical consciousness about the impact that exposure to increased levels of fake news, hate speech, populism and propaganda has on their individual well-being and, more broadly, on the wellness of society as a whole" (EAVI, n.d.c). The second type of reflexivity involves an awareness of one's own (political) beliefs, confirmation biases and "rational limitations". One blog contributor suggests that in blaming the media for disinformation and fake news we ignore the "monstrosity that is human nature" that allows fake news to have the impact it does in the first place (Thompson, 2019).

Finally, we noticed that EAVI promotes a particular form of "critical" subjectivity. Most of the time, the notion of critique appears as an adjective in EAVI's discourse, in expressions such as "critical awareness" and "critical thinking". Its importance to a holistic and reflexive mode of subjectivity is visible for instance in EAVI's explicit definition of "critical thinking": "Critical thinking is the self-discipline of analyzing, assessing and reconstructing a media text with a rigorous, mindful approach. It emphasizes effective communication and problem-solving skills and a commitment to overcoming deeply entrenched beliefs or confirmation bias" (EAVI, n.d.a).

In defining critical thought in this way, EAVI sides with MIL scholars who understand critique as an ideologically "neutral" (meta) cognitive project. We are not dealing with a notion of critique as advocated by MIL scholars drawing on more "critical" or "radical" philosophies (see 1.1). While EAVI republishes YouTube videos discussing more radical perspectives on the media, especially on the left side of the academic spectrum, this does not mean that the organization adopts the analytical frameworks and terminology of authors such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, or Noam Chomsky. In fact, the organization takes care to keep its distance, which allows it implicitly to claim a more "neutral" stance for itself. This does not mean, however, that EAVI's preferred type of MIL is indeed ideologically neutral, it merely means that it leaves the ideological aspect of its discourse implicit.

The way a blog contributor uses the notion of "common sense" reveals a lot about the type of critical subjectivity EAVI has in mind for EU citizens (Morris, 2019). The author suggests that MIL can bring back "common sense" to an EU plagued by "fake news, disinformation, distrust, hate speech and polarization". The author constructs MIL as a matter of re-introducing common sense to the EU without considering the ideological implications of consensus-building. She steers clear from notions that draw explicit attention to the link between "common sense" and "ideology" such as Chomsky and Hermann's "manufacturing of consent" or (neo-)Gramscian notions of "hegemony". Such concepts would force EAVI to acknowledge the contingency and the ideological dimension of its own project, opening up a space from which it could be criticized. Instead, EAVI's ideological stance is presented as the default – commonsensical – option, and MIL is proposed as the tool that can recruit EU citizens into this project.

4.2.   MIL as a transformative journey

EAVI conceives of MIL as a process of self-transformation. This idea is expressed in many statements across the dataset. This idea materializes rather explicitly in the cartoon *A Journey to media literacy 1: Meet Jack* (EAVI, 2017a). In this cartoon, the construction of MIL as a transformative project provides an overarching narrative. The cartoon metaphorically frames becoming media literate as "a journey" to a fictional place called "media literacy island". The video tells the story of a boy called Jack who is going on "a journey to find out what media literacy is all about". Jack is said to already master all of the technical

skills in order to get to the ML island but has not yet attained the status of media wisdom. His technical skills are represented as the boat he sails to get to his destination.

On his journey, Jack has to face many dangers, lurking in the ocean. The voice-over explains that there are "powerful forces behind the media you use every day" that may stop you from reaching the mythical ML island. The video represents these forces as strong underwater currents. Other dangers are represented as sharks ("a few rich companies" controlling the media, and "manipulations of images"), a weaponized submarine ("subtle advertising"), sea monsters hiding in the deep ("false identities", "nasty content and viruses") and pirates ("trying to sell things he doesn't need"). On his journey, Jack saves a girl from "education desert island", described as one of those "parts of the world where children don't have access to computers or the internet" and "don't have the opportunities to learn these basic technical skills". It is a place where kids cannot build a boat to go to the ML island, but also a place surrounded by "pirates" and "shark infested waters".

Jack is accompanied by "Lux", an entity in the shape of a star, who helps Jack on his transformative journey. Lux, explicitly introduced as "the EAVI avatar", represents EAVI's voice. He helps Jack "to become aware" of media-related dangers and to realize that he needs to develop "abilities" and "competencies that will enable him to make choices, take informed decisions, and communicate with others". When he finally arrives on the island, "Jack's perspective has widened and he has become media wise".

The journey metaphor testifies to the fact that rather than a set of disparate set of skills and abilities, EAVI's preferred mode of subjectivity implies a holistic transformation of the self into an entity that is able to act in a relatively autonomous fashion, in a societal context marked by dangerous entities, actors and processes. What is lacking though is any reference to MIL involving a form of political or ideological awareness. Nothing is said about propaganda, the political implications and effects of (dis)information and bias, or about forms of extremism such as far right "nationalism". Issues of ideology and hegemony are bypassed as well. The fact that such issues are omitted in one document does not necessarily mean that the organization is entirely blind to such matters, though. In order to form a more complete picture of the type of subjectivity promoted by EAVI, we also need to consider what type of democratic project EAVI has in mind for EU societies.

4.3.   *MIL as a democratic project for EU societies*

The type of subjectivity advocated by EAVI is intertwined with a rather liberal and pro-EU discourse condemning particular forms of nationalism and extremism deemed to be dangerous to EU societies and institutions. In order to explain this, we will discuss: (1) the type of society advocated by EAVI; (2) the threats to this type of society identified by EAVI; (3) the way EAVI proposes MIL as a means to deal with these threats; and (4) the type of citizenship and participation underpinning EAVI's MIL project.

4.3.1.   *EAVI's ideal society*

A first characteristic of EAVI's ideal society is its inclusiveness. EAVI states that MIL projects should be "inclusive and accessible to those who are considered minorities, marginalized and vulnerable". It explicitly refers to "children, elderly, refugees, disabled and economically insecure" citizens as important targets for MIL projects (EAVI, 2020a). An important caveat is that EAVI's notion of inclusiveness refers first and foremost to an inclusion that fosters a form of "participatory" citizenship (see further). It does not explicitly address "inclusiveness" as a matter of minority representation in the media, as would be the case in an overtly *critical* approach to MIL (see 1.1). One exception to this is a project (in which EAVI was one of the partners) that aimed at helping refugees and journalists to build stories that avoid stereotypes on migration (MyStory, n.d.).

Secondly, EAVI's ideal society has a high degree of societal cohesion, both at the level of nation states and at the level of the EU. The type of cohesion EAVI argues for has to be understood in terms of the pro-EU stance and "inclusiveness" introduced above. It is by no means a type of cohesion informed by a homogenizing notion of nationalism. EAVI sees MIL as a means to combat polarizing forces in society that may pose a threat to the EU and its values.

Finally, EAVI's MIL project is clearly a pro-EU endeavor that identifies the EU with values such as "multiculturalism", "diversity", and "democracy". While EAVI generally avoids all too specific political stances, it becomes partisan when the EU is concerned. This can be explained in part by the fact that EAVI is an organization supported by EU institutions. Its pro-EU stance may be interpreted as part of a legitimization strategy oriented towards its benefactors but it may equally be

an exponent of a liberal democratic ideology underpinning its project. In fact, EAVI's "Future of Europe" manifesto talks more about Euroskepticism and the EU than it does about MIL. It cites Guy Verhofstadt saying that "*even if the EU is not perfect, it's the best idea we've had so far*" (cited in EAVI, n.d.d, italics in original). EAVI repeatedly argues that MIL can be a tool to combat Euroskepticism.

4.3.2.   Threats to EAVI's ideal society

EAVI articulates a narrative characterized by a common ideological structure (Glynos, 2008): it simultaneously posits an ideal and an obstacle for its realization, and it grounds its MIL project in a foundational essence provided by human rights discourse. Threats to the type of liberal democratic and pro-EU mode of citizenship advocated by EAVI include: an indifference regarding MIL, a lack of "awareness" regarding one's relationship to, and use of, media; a lack of awareness regarding the way social actors seek to influence citizens via the media; the active propagation of Euroskeptic stances through the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and the stimulation of intolerance and discrimination. While EAVI recognizes that Euroskepticism may be legitimate (EAVI, n.d.b), it does consider nationalism and populism as antithetical to the EU project.

4.3.3.   MIL as a countermeasure to societal threats

EAVI justifies its MIL project as a useful and necessary endeavor to overcome threats to an inclusive, cohesive and EU project. EAVI frames MIL as a necessary condition for trust in democratic institutions in general and the EU institutions in particular. It proposes to combat disinformation on what the EU can and cannot do, as a way to avoid excessive expectations on the part of citizens. The "antidote" to Euroskepticism lies in "empowering citizens to know more about their rights and participate more effectively in the democratic life of our union" (EAVI, n.d.b). EAVI considers this to be something it could contribute to. While EAVI recognizes that "there is nothing wrong with sceptical opinions", it also stresses that "the important thing is to be sceptical in a constructive way, without the influence of prevailing disinformation and political bias" (EAVI, n.d.d).

4.3.4. EAVI's ideal citizen

EAVI provides an ethical and normative basis for its preferred liberal democratic mode of citizenship. It does so with reference to "duties, obligations, and rights" provided by a human rights discourse (EAVI, 2017d). While EAVI recognizes that the term citizenship is "usually used as a synonym of nationality", it prefers a notion of citizenship understood as a "membership in a community" implying duties, obligations and rights that one should be aware of (EAVI, 2017d). The rights evoked by EAVI include the right to "freedom of opinion and expression", the right to be "correctly informed", as well as the rights to "transparency" and "privacy". MIL is thereby interpreted as the means through which people know (how to benefit from) their rights and duties in a mediatized environment.

Another citizenship-related signifier we need to deal with in order to understand why EAVI considers MIL to be essential to democracy is "participation". MIL is considered to be a tool for democracy in as far as it enables the participation of citizens. This idea is expressed in documents all across the EAVI website. The issue is framed as follows: "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, 2020b). While EAVI frequently uses the term "participation", it does not explicitly define it in any of the documents we examined. At the same time, the meaning of "participation" shifts as it is rearticulated with other notions. For instance, EAVI talks about people who supposedly "participate" in "the media", in "the political process", in "democratic life", in "civil society", in "civic life", in "public life" and even "in society" in general. It also uses qualifiers that subtly alter the meaning of the term, as in "active", "free", "full", "responsible" and "safe" participation. Overall, "participation" operates as a fuzzy term in EAVI's discourse, functioning as a buzzword as well as a "legitimizing value" (Trültzsch-Wijnen *et al.*, 2017).

EAVI seems to reduce the notion of participation in relation to MIL to a matter of *reception* activities (Fastrez, 2010). As MIL is articulated with signifiers such as "accessing", "navigating", "curating", "understanding", "evaluating", etc., citizens tend to be positioned as receivers, consumers or audiences of media, rather than as (co-)producers of media. A more empowering notion of participation whereby citizens make (co-)decisions that impact on the way media are produced

and organized (Carpentier, 2011) is hardly considered. One exception is the project aimed at empowering migrants and refugees "to tell their own stories" in order to counter stereotypes (MyStory, n.d.). Besides, there are some references to MIL as a condition for more "creative" forms of citizenship, but what "creative" exactly means is left open to interpretation. Similarly, the relation between people and technology is mostly framed as a matter of "use" while the role of people in (co-)producing technology (Fastrez & Philippette, 2017) is overlooked.

This is not to say that EAVI is completely blind to issues of power and control as constitutive of participation and citizenship. However, it approaches the negotiation of power relations mostly as a matter of media selection, interpretation and evaluation. When EAVI talks about "taking control", it implicitly suggests that it is primarily at the receiving side that power relations between citizens (as audiences) and media content, technology and/or institutions can be (critically) negotiated (EAVI, 2020c).

Conclusion

Our study shows that EAVI deals with MIL as a transformative project for the self and for society, constructed through a specific articulation of MIL signifiers with specific concepts of critique and citizenship. This project is underpinned by ideological assumptions that leave traces across EAVI's documents, for discourse scholars to investigate. While this understanding of MIL may be legitimate, it is not the only form of MIL imaginable. In presenting its project as the commonsensical option, EAVI betrays its own hegemonic ambitions, and forces us to examine what sort of political subjectivity is being promoted.

This article demonstrates the relevance of CDS for analyzing the ideological assumptions underpinning MIL projects. Relying on CDS approaches, researchers can formulate (reflexive) critiques of the strategies and mechanisms that naturalize contingent discursive structures such as identities, narratives, or socio-political projects, including those of MIL projects. Our goal was not to provide a mere descriptive account of EAVI's MIL project, but to add a layer of meaning that allows readers to become aware of its ideological assumptions and functions. Ideology can be understood as a specific function of discursive practice. It structures social relationships and the distribution of resources in a society, by normalizing or politicizing aspects of reality. In that sense,

the added layer provided by our analysis is also ideological because it politicizes the EAVI project. We did not seek to delegitimize EAVI, but did render the contingency of the way it defines MIL explicit. Rather than laying bare supposedly "hidden" meanings of EAVI's MIL discourse, we showed how EAVI inscribes itself in and (de)legitimizes particular forms of political subjectivity.

As MIL discourses, policies and practices are booming in an era of mis- and disinformation, rapid technological developments, and political instability, it is important to realize that no MIL project is ideologically neutral. The field of MIL studies would benefit from more analyses of MIL projects and programs, as well as from comparative studies focusing on MIL discourses and practices. This is important in order to map MIL as a domain of knowledge and practice, bearing in mind that MIL projects are not ideologically neutral. Our study was limited in scope and there is much to be won by combining a CDS perspective with a more ethnographic approach that takes the reception side of MIL initiatives seriously. The question remains how MIL initiatives and discourses, such as those of EAVI, are interpreted by the citizens they address.

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