



Article

Youth organizations' capacity building on youth media literacy: A comparative study of youth NGOs in Finland, Norway and Romania

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection of media literacy and civic engagement within the context of youth organizations across three countries: Finland, Norway and Romania. Employing a comparative cross-national research design, and drawing on interviews with youth organizations, we explore how NGOs understand and conceptualize media literacy and civic engagement. Subsequently, we identify national NGOs' capacity building strategies for working with media literacy in ways that encourage youth civic engagement. Our findings reveal nuanced differences in the operationalization of media literacy and civic engagement concepts across the three countries, shaped by local political, economic, and cultural contexts. We found that whereas the term "media literacy" is understood similarly in all three countries, the position and role of the youth organizations themselves seems to be quite different depending on country context.

By highlighting the distinct strategies employed by NGOs in Finland, Norway, and Romania, this study underscores the critical role of tailored capacity-building initiatives in addressing national disparities. The



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findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and NGOs, emphasizing the need for cross-sectoral collaborations and international knowledge exchange to enhance youth empowerment. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding contextual factors in shaping organizational approaches to media literacy and civic engagement and contributes to the discourse on youth empowerment and civic participation in the digital age.

Keywords: Media literacy, NGO, Civic Engagement, capacity building

Introduction

The advancement of technology has impacted the ways that young people access and consume media (Aditya, 2022; Flanagan, 2016; Holitsyn & Frolova, 2023; Morais et al., 2017; Sutrisno, 2023). Therefore, it is essential for youth organizations to have a strong understanding of media literacy to effectively engage and support young people to become critical consumers and even producers of media. Youth organizations thus see capacity building in this area as crucial to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the constantly evolving media landscape and to aid young citizens in doing the same. This article explores how youth organizations in three countries understand the role of media literacy in building civic engagement among youth, and how they build their own capacity in this area.

In this study *civic engagement* is defined as active participation in societal processes, emphasizing youth empowerment to influence community and political spheres. Rooted in participatory culture, civic engagement combines critical reflection with practical involvement, enabling individuals to contribute meaningfully to public discourse and decision-making (Jenkins et al., 2009; Zaff et al., 2011). *Media literacy* encompasses technical, critical, and ethical competencies for navigating digital spaces (Hobbs, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2007; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). It includes both Kim and Yang's (2016) concept of *Internet Skill Literacy* understood as the technical mastery of tools, and *Internet Information Literacy* understood as evaluating content credibility and ideological implications. The latter directly supports civic engagement by fostering resilience to disinformation and responsible content creation, transcending passive consumption to enable purposeful participation.

The research presented here stems from a two-year cross sectoral project encompassing NGOs and research partners in Finland, Norway and Romania in 2021-2023. The project was bent on regarding young people as potential media content creators, not only consumers, and therefore on providing youth organizations with research-based knowledge about how to meet young peoples' needs in the field of media literacy. It is clear from our work in this project, as is also reflected in this study, that variations of the economic and cultural factors, as well as the educational systems in the three countries, create quite different contexts for identifying and addressing such needs. Still, the digital *global village* (McLuhan, 1962) sees no national borders and offers many of the same digital meeting places for youth in all three countries.

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Such similarities in online virtual spaces and the hardware used to access them, combined with the different contexts of the three countries makes it interesting to investigate this with a national comparative approach.

To approach an understanding of youth organizations' capacity building on media literacy, we conducted a series of interviews with NGOs and projects working in the field of media literacy and civic engagement for young people. The interviews have been set on understanding how they pursue their goal of supporting young people to develop their media and civic competences, but also at transforming young people into civically engaged citizens or community *civic engagers*. We address the following research questions:

- What kind of activities are seen to build media literacy and encourage civic engagement among youth?
- How do NGOs working with youth in Finland, Norway and Romania build their capacity to work with media literacy?

Literature review

The definition of a youth organization or an organization working with youth is not universally agreed upon and is shaped by political, social, and institutional contexts (Holtom et al., 2016). In this study we understand a youth organization as an entity that engages in activities aimed at benefiting young people, either directly through engagement and participation or indirectly through policy advocacy, research, and education. Their work often takes the form of social and informal education that emphasizes voluntary participation, relationship-building, and democratic practice with or for young people (Batsleer, 2013). While such initiatives have already for a long time been an arena for developing media literacy among youth, it is a challenge that development of civic engagement in youth work often goes undocumented (Helve, 2015; Panagides et al., 2019). Nevertheless, research has shown that youth civic engagement is essential to fostering social and personal development in individuals, and that young people are effective agents of social change (Balcazar et al., 2024; Shaw et al., 2014; Silke et al., 2020). It can also take different forms, center around different interests and lead to different forms of attitudinal and behavioral change in individual youth (Leung, 2009; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013).

Connections between media literacy and civic engagement have been increasingly analyzed in research over the past two decades (Buckingham, 2006; Erstad & Amdam, 2013; Livingstone, 2004). The 2016 IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) report reveals that while civic engagement among young people is generally low and not strongly linked to media use, students who use media for information on political and social issues tend to have higher trust in civic institutions (Schulz et al., 2018). Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) found that positive impacts between digital media use and increased

engagement in civic and political life is dependent upon political use of digital media such as blogging, reading news and participating in online debate. They also found a strong relation between online and offline political activity, which undermines claims of slacktivism (i.e. a preference for political activism which requires minimum effort). However, a more recent 2022 ICCS publication suggests that civic engagement through digital media is less extensive than expected, with in-person discussions still being the preferred method for exchanging views on civic issues (Schulz et al., 2023). Youth remain primarily consumers rather than producers of digital media.

The positive association between trust in civic institutions and media use contradicts suggestions about negative effects of media news on institutional perceptions (Schulz et al., 2018, p. 137). Higher levels of civic learning consistently correlate with students' interest in political and social issues, expected university degree attainment and higher civic knowledge levels (Schulz et al., 2018, p. 205). These findings suggest that media literacy can potentially help individuals become more informed and engaged citizens.

However, some studies advise caution in drawing direct connections between media literacy and civic participation. Bucholtz et al. (2024) highlight the complexity of both terms and note that relatively few dimensions seem to be activated where relations have been found. They argue that media literate youth do not necessarily score high in civic participation and that an increase of media literacy may not compensate for structural reasons for low civic activity (Bucholtz et al., 2024). Kim and Yang (2016) distinguish between *Internet skill literacy* and *Internet information literacy*, finding the latter to relate to civic engagement. Thus, international research seems to suggest a potential for media literacy to become an important tool for exercising civic engagement by providing individuals with the necessary information to make informed decisions and participate in their communities. However, such an effect is not given by skill in handling the media alone, but on the contrary, necessitates the integration of media literacy into formal and informal education systems.

Rapid reviews (Grant & Booth, 2009) of relevant research in Finland, Norway and Romania reveal sparse research on media literacy combined with civic engagement in all three countries (Medica Civic Engagers, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). In Norway only five peer-reviewed articles met the criteria of being cross-sectoral works addressing young people's civic engagement through or with the use of media in Norway (Medica Civic Engagers, 2022c). Digital literacy skills and the subject "media education" have been part of the National curriculum since the turn of the century. Consequently, youth has been engaged through public education, in critical consumption and digital and multimodal content creation (Christensen et al., 2021; Erstad, 2018; Erstad & Gilje, 2008). This has, however, not been found to correlate strongly with civic engagement (Christensen et al., 2021). While most students have access to internet-connected devices, only a small fraction actively post about political or societal issues online. Research on student teachers

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indicated difficulties in integrating democratic engagement using social media into teaching plans (Biseth et al., 2018). Sevincer et al. (2018) documented how an NGO can take part in building digital media skills, and that such an actor may be more successful than traditional educational institutions in making the connection with civic engagement. This aspect has however, not been subject to more research in Norway.

A similar scenario is evident in the equally scarce research on Finland (Project name, 2022b). Whereas youth regard themselves as engaged users of social media, carrying out an active citizenship through digital platforms (Christensen, 2012; Sandström Kjellin et al., 2010) only about 1% are content creators (Ertiö et al., 2020). In Finland Civic media education and media literacy skills are presented as part of citizenship and information society skills emphasized in The Citizen Participation Policy Program (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2019). The program underscores the significance of media participation and education in fostering the civic engagement and wellbeing of Finnish youth. It calls for a comprehensive approach that combines media literacy, participatory activities, and ethical research practices to empower young people as active agents in their communities and the broader society. Schools, youth services and public libraries play a role in promoting media skills (Höylä, 2012; Kotilainen & Rantala, 2010).

Romania's research on the topic is also limited but growing, with an emphasis on resilience to disinformation and mobilization through social media. Civic engagement education has been connected to *service learning* – an educational approach that complements classroom knowledge and activities with volunteering and reflection activities (Rusu, 2020). Further, aspects of civic engagement through social media have been displayed in youth's participation in the 2017 anti-governmental protests. This has been seen as a potential aspect of civic engagement education (Sălcudean, 2017). The public-school sector, despite having had an optional media literacy curriculum in secondary school since 2004, is seen as weak and outdated. Instead, the country relies on the NGO sector, with actors such as MediaWatch, The center for independent journalism and MediaWise Society (Medica Civic Engagers, 2022a).

The lack of substantial relevant research in these three countries suggests a need for more studies on the development of media skills and civic engagement in youth. Media and information literacy (MIL) is crucial for today's youth, who are growing up with unprecedented access to information. With the rise of social media and the proliferation of online news sources, it is more important than ever to be able to critically evaluate the information being presented. Additionally, civic engagement is essential for creating positive change in society. By understanding how to effectively engage with political processes and institutions, young people can make their voices heard and contribute to shaping the world around them. Together, media literacy and civic engagement empower youth to be informed and active citizens, capable of making meaningful contributions to their communities and beyond.

Method

This study employs a comparative cross-national research design to explore how media literacy and civic engagement are understood and conceptualized by NGOs in three distinct countries: Finland, Norway and Romania. The research aims to uncover how these organizations work to raise awareness and develop the ability for youth to build and exercise civic engagement through digital media (de Vaus, 2008). Considering the many differences between organizations working with youth, which we have introduced above, this study moves beyond a simple “compare and contrast” approach. Instead of viewing the NGOs or their efforts in media literacy and civic engagement as isolated entities, we recognize that both are shaped by their contextual linkages in “place, space, and time” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7).

Whereas the concept of media literacy is transnational, often operationalized within UNESCO’s Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework, the implementation of these activities is deeply influenced by local political and economic contexts. We may in other words think of media literacy as a boundary object, i.e. an element with enough plasticity to facilitate collaboration and understanding across different social worlds (Olofsson et al., 2021; Star & Griesemer, 1989). As Geertz eloquently stated, “No one lives in the world in general. Everyone [...] lives in some confined and limited stretch of it - ‘the world around here’” (Geertz, 1996, p. 262).

Data gathering

The collaborative two-year project (2021-2023) that this study draws data from, involving NGOs and research institutions across Finland, Norway, and Romania, emphasized youth empowerment in media creation, with the aim to equip youth organizations with evidence-based strategies for media literacy development. The three national contexts presented distinct socioeconomic, cultural, and educational landscapes that shaped how youth media literacy needs were identified and approached.

The study employed a multistage purposeful sampling strategy to identify and engage with NGOs across three countries (Palinkas et al., 2015). Initially, one NGO from each country was selected through criterion sampling, based on their established work with youth media projects and their participation in the two-year project that the study springs out from. These three organizations subsequently assisted in identifying additional participants through snowball sampling, where each partner NGO recommended two to three other organizations within their respective countries that met the study's criteria for youth media project implementation.

The data collection process followed a sequential design, beginning with structured interviews focusing on best practices in youth media projects with the eight snowball-sampled organizations; three from Finland,

three from Romania and two from Norway (see Appendix 1). The insights gathered from these interviews provided valuable contextual background that informed the subsequent phase of semi-structured in-depth interviews with the three partner NGOs. This iterative approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of youth work practices, where initial findings helped shape and refine the focus of the more detailed investigations that followed.

The three NGOs will be introduced more thoroughly later. Here suffice to say that they share a common goal of enhancing media literacy and civic engagement among youth, but each takes a distinct approach - the Romanian NGO through direct entrepreneurship education, the Finnish NGO through professional development of youth workers, and the Norwegian NGO through youth-led initiatives focused on participation and critical thinking. The in-depth interviews were conducted with either the executive director of the NGO or a project leader working with relevant projects who were appointed by the director. The interviews explored how the organizations develop and implement youth media literacy initiatives, examining their approaches, challenges, and capacity-building needs to foster civic engagement through media education (see Appendix 2). The thematic analysis of the first set of interviews can be described as critically interpretive, as respondents were primarily describing the practicalities of conducting youth projects. The analysis probed into how informants understood and operationalized terms such as media literacy and civic engagement. The subsequent in-depth interviews with three NGOs took these preliminary insights as their starting point and were thus more experientially and deductively oriented (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2022). While the first rounds provided an impression of perceptions and perspectives in each country, the second round offered a deeper understanding of the values and considerations of one actor from each country.

Analytical approach

We employed reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to investigate the crucial digital competencies for youth, the effective strategies to enhance critical thinking as perceived by the informants, and how previous and ongoing youth media projects encourage civic engagement. During the analysis, we intentionally maintained and examined tensions within the analytic themes, as these tensions enhanced the comparative nature of the study and highlighted the differences between the informants' orientations.

In our analysis, we combined the *results* and *discussion* sections into a single *analysis* section. This approach has been proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 131) to highlight the interpretative work of the researchers. It allowed us to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the data, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between media literacy, civic engagement, and the specific socio-political contexts of Finland, Norway and Romania.

This comprehensive methodology ensures a thorough understanding of how NGOs conceptualize and foster media literacy and civic engagement among youth while also considering the unique contextual factors that influence these processes in each country.

Analysis

From the analysis of the first round of structured interviews, media literacy emerged as a multidimensional construct, aligning with existing scholarship that frames it as a composite of technical, critical, and social competencies (Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Media literacy encompasses not only the technical mastery of digital tools and platforms but also the strategic capacities necessary to navigate and maximize visibility in digital spaces, as highlighted by Buckingham (2019). Furthermore, it includes more personal and value-laden aspects such as safeguarding privacy and understanding the ideological dimensions of one's communication practices (Kellner & Share, 2007).

In the context of the interviews, civic engagement was not conceptualized primarily as a skill set but rather as an orientation within media literacy training projects. This understanding is congruent with theories that link civic engagement to participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2009), where digital media serve as facilitators of civic participation. Engagement, in this regard, aligns with the definition of being actively involved in societal issues and processes (Zaff et al., 2011). Across all three countries, involvement appeared as a central value, albeit with different operational emphases.

The Finnish and Norwegian youth media projects were strongly emphasizing the importance of the youth forming their own projects, as for instance when a Norwegian NGO urged youth projects to “[g]et youth participation from the early planning phase. Let youth come up with the ideas themselves or invite them in early to influence the ideas”. The Finnish projects advocated a link between individual learning and development for each youth participant and the good of the local community, with reflections such as “It is an advantage if the project will have a positive impact on a larger number of people, not just those involved in the project”. To a certain degree, they seemed to see media literacy as a means to build and strengthen these two factors together. In Romania the NGOs seemed more strategically focused on communication and empowerment through social media. This could take the form of communication strategy advice such as the statement that “[p]ersonalization, exceptionality, cultural proximity coupled with impactful visuals work best for social media storytelling” or more cautionary advice about how community projects have sometimes “set too high outreach indicators and we have paid too much money to find ourselves under the control of the algorithms and content filtering due to the marketing policies”. The more instrumental tone of the advice from these informants may have to do with the fact that the three Romanian NGOs interviewed were more focused on basic civic and political rights than were the ones on Finland and

Norway. This can in turn be seen as a reflection of the Romanian society where the level of basic digital skills is generally low (Centrul Pentu Jurnalism Independent, 2022; European Commission, 2022; Media Civic Engagers, 2022a) and civic rights and democratic values may be more at peril, especially regarding marginalized ethnic and language groups that seem to be more included in the national contexts of Finland and Norway (Amnesty International, 2022; Badulescu, 2023; OECD, 2023; Wagner et al., 2022).

Both concepts, i.e. *media literacy* and *civic engagement*, are also talked about in two different ways. They are seen from the viewpoint of the organizations themselves, who make use of digital media and are situated in their societies with their own civic engagement as part of their self-image. One Romanian NGO, for example, states that the “best channel for visibility, for communicating project activities, but also for recruiting participants is social media - in the Romanian context, is Facebook.” The concepts are, however, also discussed as central topics and goals to be reached for the target groups of the different projects described. A Finnish NGO describes how, in the finalization of local youth initiated neighborhood projects, participants “record a video of the action, which will be published at a local premiere and on social media”. For both the target groups and the organizations themselves, “the media is a means to make something meaningful visible”. The focus on media skill development is prevalent across the dataset, and the value of being engaged is nested into the practicalities of running projects.

Thus, in the context of the organizations' own work media literacy and civic engagement appears more as strategies or approaches to reaching specific project goals whereas in the context of the target groups, they surface as values. Upon this general and not very nuanced image, we will now turn to the in-depth interviews.

Three NGOs in depth

The Finnish, Norwegian and Romanian NGOs share a common thread in their dedication to enhancing media literacy and fostering the personal and professional development of young people. However, their approaches, target groups, and operational strategies reveal distinct differences that reflect their unique missions and the contexts within which they operate.

We will first introduce the Romanian NGO, which focuses more on working directly with young individuals than do the other two organizations. Established in 2000, this NGO is dedicated to youth empowerment through entrepreneurship education. It specifically targets individuals aged 16 to 25, helping them develop professional skills, particularly in entrepreneurship. This organization collaborates with local small and medium-sized enterprises as well as with multinational companies to provide internships and educational projects, thereby creating a practical framework for professional growth. The NGO's emphasis on digital skills and media literacy is aimed at equipping young people with the ability to critically assess information,

a skill that is increasingly important in a digital age. Their community engagement initiatives are designed to encourage active participation in civic and social activities, fostering a sense of responsibility and contribution to societal development. The Romanian NGO also recognizes the need for capacity development in media literacy, particularly for educators, due to the absence of formal media education programs in Romanian schools.

The Finnish NGO, while also committed to media literacy, takes a different approach by targeting professionals who work with children and young people. Acting as a bridge between these professionals and the research community, the Finnish organization focuses on the promotion of youth media literacy through the development of educational materials and training programs. Their work on multiliteracy skills in vocational schools underscores a broader educational scope, aiming to integrate various forms of literacy into the curriculum. Civic engagement through media literacy is a shared goal with the Romanian NGO, but the Finnish organization places a stronger emphasis on networking and serving as a hub for specialists and researchers in the field. This strategic position allows them to disseminate cutting-edge research and best practices in media education.

The Norwegian NGO was founded by youth for youth, with a decade of experience in engaging young people in media and communication skills development. Unlike the Romanian NGO, which has a strong focus on entrepreneurship, the Norwegian organization prioritizes media literacy as a means of fostering critical thinking and creativity. Their approach encourages active interaction with media, moving beyond passive consumption to content creation and critical analysis. The Norwegian NGO has shifted much its focus from direct work with youth to empowering other organizations, thereby amplifying their impact on media literacy. Their commitment to adapting to the evolving needs of their members and international partners demonstrates a dynamic and responsive approach to their work.

While all three NGOs share a commitment to media literacy and youth development, each does so with a distinct focus. One integrates media literacy with entrepreneurship education and direct empowering engagement with young people. Another serves as an educational resource and network facilitator for professionals in the field, with a broader focus on multiliteracy. The third NGO emphasizes the empowerment of organizations to serve youth, fostering critical thinking and creativity through active media engagement. Each organization's unique strategies and focus areas reflect its capabilities and interests, adaptation to the specific needs of their target audiences, and the cultural and educational landscapes of their respective countries.

Thematic comparison

The analysis of the interviews with Youth NGOs in Finland, Norway and Romania has revealed a common

understanding of activities that build and develop media literacy and encourage civic engagement among youth. This is not surprising as the need for media literacy reflects a technological and social transformation that has influenced the three countries in much the same way over recent decades and is thoroughly codified in European Union policy and international guidelines (Audiovisual Media Services Directive, 2018; European Digital Media Observatory, 2024; UNESCO et al., 2013). The nuanced differences between the NGOs can to some degree be seen as reflected in the different country contexts and demonstrated in their understanding of civic engagement. The question of capacity building, on the other hand, reveals more clearly three different ways of seeing their own role and opportunities for impacting their societies.

The following part of the analysis is structured around three key themes, each reflecting the distinctive characteristics and operational strategies of the NGOs in question. The first theme delves into the varying relationships these NGOs maintain with their national governments, highlighting the diverse ways in which they navigate and negotiate their roles within different political and educational landscapes. The second theme focuses on the NGOs' approaches to media literacy, revealing how each organization prioritizes different aspects of media education based on their specific national contexts and organizational missions. The third theme examines capacity building, illustrating how these NGOs develop and expand their capabilities to better serve their target groups and achieve their objectives.

Shared understanding, different foci

NGOs from the three countries all understand media literacy as comprising creative, critical, ethical and participatory aspects, as well as the skills to consume, produce and interact in safe and responsible ways. Their understanding of MIL is in other words similar to previously mentioned established research perspectives (Buckingham, 2007; 2019; Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone, 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). They do, however, diverge in what they see as the most important aspects of this complex construction. The Romanian NGO is focused on the perils of false information, which in their view may be countered by strengthening youth to “discern between truth and false and between information and misinformation”. This “helps them to be aware and responsible” and is thus in line with the emphasis on resilience to disinformation that characterize the country's research (Medica Civic Engagers, 2022a). The focus of the Finnish NGO is comparatively more balanced between the perils of digital media, which they tone down and believe can be countered by efforts “to be safe and take care of their own privacy”, and youth's abilities “to express themselves and just to affect the things that matters to them”. The representative of the Norwegian NGO takes this even further by criticizing what they see as a “reactional media literacy which is basically seeing the media generally as a kind of enemy”. This puts the two latter NGOs, again, in line with the relevant research of their respective countries (Medica Civic Engagers, 2022b; 2022c). In the Norwegian NGO's approach, they also “focus on learning by doing instead of protecting from engagement

with the media". In this they see new tech and information abundance as a risk as much as a resource when building media literacy, and they debunk the idea that being "digital native" means being digitally literate. In claiming that "just knowing some tools doesn't mean that they are media literate", they effectively give credence to Kim and Yang's (2016) analytical separation between *internet skill literacy* and *internet information literacy* and seem to regard the latter as more relevant in the context of being civically engaged. In other words, while the Romanian NGO describes the digital sphere as imminently menacing, the Finnish and Norwegian organizations understand it as a place for precaution but put an equally strong or stronger emphasis on the possibilities stemming from nurturing a mindful use of digital media.

The activities highlighted by each organization as the most central to build media literacy reflect and confirm each organization's different focal point of their own work. The Romanian NGO's strong focus on aiding youth in developing entrepreneurial skills is reflected in how the organization itself cooperates closely with private entrepreneurial actors and attempts to inspire them into taking responsibility in their local communities. This focus not only aids in skill development but also instills a sense of responsible citizenship, as young individuals focused on starting businesses are more likely to engage in activities like paying taxes and taking an interest in politics, recognizing the impact on their businesses (Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). The Norwegian NGO, established by the youth themselves, lays relatively more emphasis on personal empowerment. This emphasis aligns with the idea that fostering personal agency and empowerment can lead to increased engagement in civic activities (Leung, 2009). The Finnish NGO was founded by researchers and sees itself as a mediator between the research community and the youth sector. This intermediary role underscores the importance of knowledge exchange and collaboration between different stakeholders to enhance youth civic engagement.

"NGO working with youth" as a boundary object

The analysis of NGOs working with youth reveals that their relationships with young people and their respective national governments vary significantly. It appears that, beyond some basic and superficial defining characteristics, the concept of an "NGO working with youth" should be considered distinct and context-dependent, varying from one country to another. Considering Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) critique of the concept of a unit of analysis, we may observe that we have been careful in not stating any particular "unit of analysis". Instead, we have applied a logic of tracing to the elements of "NGO working with youth". While the concept of "organization" seems to be understood similarly (or at least that differences do not surface) in our material, the studied NGOs working with youth differ in their relation to the national governments as well as to their relation to the youth themselves.

Whereas an NGO is non-governmental in that it is independent of the government of its country, the

relations between the NGOs studied and their respective national governments differs quite strongly. In Romania, the NGOs have a tense relation to Romanian authorities. In the in-depth interview with the Romanian NGO, the public education sector is mentioned but a couple of times, and then always in the context of how it is *not* answering to the challenge of digital media. "In Romania," the NGO's representative said, "the education minister still discusses the importance of teaching media education in schools". The term "still discusses", implies that the interviewee understands as still being unsure of whether media education is important, and seems to believe this discussion should have been finished and the minister acted a long time ago. Meanwhile "media education is done primarily through NGOs, since there is no curriculum in the formal school program". The three Romanian NGOs from the first round of interviews all work to address problems that arise from this lack of attention to media literacy education from the side of the government (Medica Civic Engagers, 2022a). We have also seen how anti-governmental protests are understood as a catalyst for civic engagement (Sălcudean, 2017). While we do not have specific insight into any explicit strategy of the Romanian NGO toward the authorities, their account of having cooperated with both local, national and international business partners as well as with supranational body such as the Erasmus program of the European Union, indicates a strategy of circumventing the national government in their work. However, this should not be understood as a disengagement from politics. Their commitment to working for youth civic engagement is strong as they seek to inspire youth to become more engaged in their local community through civic and social initiatives.

By contrast, the Finnish NGO as an acknowledged expert organization for media education, is part of the Finnish national strategy for building media literacy and online safety in the population (European Commission, 2023). From this position they seek to understand new media phenomena and try to respond to the needs of teachers and other kinds of youth workers in relation to these.

The Norwegian NGO represents a third way of relating to the government. Being essentially a grassroots organization representing what they themselves term the "nonprofit, nonformal education sector", they feel like they are "not seen as a kind of a strategic partner of educational system". They explain this by pointing to the fact that the Norwegian educational authorities, while acknowledging the central importance of digital and media literacy, is seen as already having both the policy and the capacity in place to meet this need in their teachers and infrastructure. This observation is supported by research on the Norwegian school sector (Erstad, 2018; Erstad & Gilje, 2008). However, research is also suggesting that the public school's efforts have not led to a stronger development of civic engagement (Christensen et al., 2021). This indicates that there could still be room for new initiatives in Norwegian education. Despite this, the NGO experiences that there is little room for external actors who may wish to take part in shaping the understanding of media literacy in these government bodies.

Thus, our three cases present us with three ways of relating to governments and public policy regarding media literacy. We propose a novel analogy to conceptualize these relationships. One of being invited in and acknowledged as experts in the field, one as knocking on the door without being let in, and one of turning away from public policy and rather working with private business partners.

The three NGOs' relations to the youth of their countries, reveal an almost opposite picture. While the Romanian NGO is working directly with 100-150 young people annually, the Finnish NGO is working with those who work with them and not with the youth directly. The Norwegian NGO is, again, in a special position. As the organization was created by youth with a purpose of working with youth, they must be said to enjoy a closeness to their target group. However, as they have identified few socially deprived youth groups that need "empowering" in Norway and media literacy is already incorporated and taken seriously in the public school system, they are now mostly working with youth and youth NGOs in other countries.

Capacity building as expanding fields of interest

All three NGOs seem to express an awareness of the fact that their choice of focus area necessarily implies loss of other perspectives. When reflecting upon their profile and possible directions for development, all three seem to describe possibilities that proximate the profiles of one or both other two NGOs. This state of having chosen different paths while acknowledging the value of other perspectives than one's own, lays the ground for meaningful project cooperation, which is also mentioned as a capacity-building opportunity by all three.

The Finnish NGO, despite being very aware of their strong position as a mediator between the research community and policy/executive actors in youth media literacy, has an expressed wish to be more in direct contact with the youth themselves. The representative of the NGO says,

"...we thought that it would be good, helpful and we could do better work if we had the connection for the youth as well, like straight to the youth [...] like some kind of focus group or something"

By contrast, The Norwegian NGO, which is constituted of youth representatives, has an expressed wish to "develop better and more strategic collaborations with schools". They are, however, also aware of the culture and industry of video games as "a very important aspect of media literacy" and a possible route of topical expansion that they had not worked directly with. As public schools represent the public sector and the games industry is a prominent field for private entrepreneurs, we may see the Norwegian NGO as situated between the Finnish and Rumanian NGOs in this aspect. The Romanian NGO, while actively seeking cooperation in the private sector, expresses frustration with public education and politicians who have not yet implemented digital media into the school curriculum in any meaningful way, leaving the entirety of this important mission to the NGO-sector. They report to have reached individual teachers in

their projects who have “expressed their interest in media literacy education and the instruments we developed”. This leaves us to assume that they would have wished to expand into meaningful cooperation with educational authorities had they seen such opportunities.

The organizations' varying priorities and activities are primarily driven by resource constraints, as limited funding and staff necessitate strategic choices about where to concentrate their efforts. The differences in focus do however appear to be influenced significantly by the specific needs and circumstances of the countries in which they operate.

Conclusion

Our investigation into youth organizations in Finland, Norway and Romania has revealed a shared understanding of media literacy and what builds media literacy and encourages civic engagement. This concept encompasses both protective measures and the empowering capabilities of today's networked and digital society, enabling young people to actively access, evaluate, and create media content. Across all three countries, these skills are viewed as increasingly important. Young people are constantly exposed to a wide range of media messages, making it essential for them to develop critical evaluation skills for informed decision-making and effective participation in public discourse.

However, while some basic underlying values are shared among the NGOs of the three countries, considerable differences in the social and economic situation lay basis for quite different approaches to how youth organizations working to impact youth media literacy in the three countries build capacity. The Romanian NGO seems to be more directly involved with the youth themselves, running educational activities in cooperation with local and international businesses. In Finland the NGO interviewed was mainly teaching youth workers who were on the payroll of the municipalities. In Norway, the NGO, despite having been working directly with local youth in the past, was now more focused on international work with capacity building of NGOs in other parts of Europe.

One may go so far as to claim that the Romanian NGOs to a certain degree has assumed the role of catering for needs that the government is unable to meet. The NGOs of Norway and Finland, by contrast, must find their roles in a community where the national and local governments do address the challenges of new media. Here, the three NGOs studied make themselves relevant in two different ways. The Finnish NGO does in fact fill a gap as a mediator between the research community and the youth worker professionals in the public sector. The Norwegian NGO has, perhaps for lack of a role to play in the public education system, turned its gaze to other countries where they consider that their expertise is more needed.

Whereas this study set forth with an intention of mapping how media literacy is understood differently in

different parts of Europe, and probe into how that affects youth organizations' capacity building strategies, we instead found that the concept of *youth organization* is itself a somewhat ill-defined boundary object. The complex and relatively novel concept of media literacy is well defined in both research and international policy. The NGOs studied were well informed about this and chose their strategies and areas of focus based on a shared understanding of the field in general. In interesting contrast to this, each youth organization, while being a traditional and well-known phenomenon in all countries, needed to redefine itself and its role in a changing society.

These distinctions underscore the diverse landscape of youth civic engagement, and the varied approaches adopted by NGOs across different countries. Recognizing the unique social and cultural environments in which these organizations function emphasizes the importance of tailored strategies that resonate with the specific needs and aspirations of young people. Such strategies are essential for fostering active citizenship and meaningful participation in society.

Implications of the study

This comparative analysis yields critical insights for policymakers, educators, and civil society stakeholders working at the intersection of media literacy and youth civic engagement. Firstly, the study underscores that media literacy initiatives must account for national socio-political landscapes. Secondly, the emphasis on critical thinking and civic-oriented media implies that media literacy programs should integrate civic ethics, disinformation resilience, and participatory content creation to foster meaningful engagement. Thirdly, The Norwegian NGO's pivot to international collaboration and the Finnish NGO's intermediary role, as well as the project that this study springs out from itself, reveal opportunities for cross-border knowledge exchange. Platforms like the EU's Erasmus+ program could leverage these findings to design peer-learning initiatives addressing regional disparities in youth empowerment. Finally, the NGOs' dual function as both media literacy educators and civic engagement facilitators highlight their potential to bridge research, policy, and grassroots action. This suggests a need for structured partnerships between NGOs, governments, and academia to amplify impact—particularly in countries like Romania, where NGOs compensate for systemic shortcomings.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The small sample size limits broad generalizations. Snowball sampling, while pragmatic, risks homogeneity bias, as participating NGOs were interconnected through a shared project. Future studies should include a wider array of organizations, both grassroots collectives and government-affiliated bodies. Secondly, the reliance on NGO representatives' accounts—rather than direct input from youth participants—may overlook

discrepancies between organizational intent and youth experiences. Longitudinal studies tracking youth outcomes post-engagement could validate the reported strategies. Thirdly, the study captures a snapshot in time (2021–2023). The dynamic nature of digital media necessitates follow-up research to assess how evolving platforms (e.g., AI-driven tools) reshape media literacy demands. Finally, while the study notes tensions between Romanian NGOs and policymakers, it does not deeply explore structural power imbalances. Comparative policy analysis could clarify how state funding or regulatory frameworks shape NGO strategies. On the supranational level, the role of EU directives and UNESCO frameworks in shaping national approaches is acknowledged but underexplored. Future work could investigate how global standards interact with localized NGO practices.

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Appendix 1. “Best Practices” - Interview Guide structured as “Do’s” and “Don’ts”

The Media Civic Engagers project aims to engage, connect and empower young people and transform them into civic engagers, by enhancing their media and information literacy (MIL) skills through cross-sectorial and innovative open educational tools. The project goal is to improve youth work in the field of media literacy, empowering youth organizations to:

- support young people to develop their critical thinking and MIL competencies through media projects in order to engage more with their communities and relevant stakeholders;
- support young people to express their opinions through powerful and relevant youth media projects and a European youth media platform, in order to influence policy-makers, decision-makers, CSOs and other relevant stakeholders, but also to be able to play the role of civic engagers;
- strengthen young people's sense of initiative and their civic participation, helping them to put in practice and speak up about their ideas for solving social problems, by learning storytelling techniques, visual storytelling, photography and filmmaking, photo or video-editing, interviewing, designing media campaigns, organizing teams and projects, etc.

The main target groups are the youth workers and youth organizations, as well as young people interested in developing their MIL & civic competencies and become civic engagers.

The interview will be used to develop a guide for youth organizations on how to develop civic media projects with young people.

This interview's aim is to collect best practices from experts who have developed and managed or participated in youth media projects. Based on the collected responses and analysis of additional documents (such as project reports and public project websites), the [name removed for peer review] team will develop a coherent practical guideline for youth organizations interested in developing youth media projects. Experts are expected to draw from personal experience in one or several projects and provide practical advice or examples (that are not necessarily available in project reports) for each of the 6 phases.

1. Project Identification and Planning Phase refers to the identification and planning stage such as the need analysis, the challenges that the youth organizations want to address, whom they want to address, the scope of the project, what other initiatives are there, what are the objectives and/or expected results, the timeframe of your project, etc.

Question proposals:

DO: What is the first thing you do when you start planning a youth media project? How do you make decisions about what to include/not to include in your project?

DON'T: What do you think it should be avoided in the planning phase of a youth media project?

2. Project Budgeting Phase will walk the youth organizations through all the steps necessary for managing human resources, technical equipment, materials/supplies, communications/ publications, etc.

Question proposals:

DO: What is the most important thing you do when you plan the budget for a youth media project? How do you make sure that the proposed budget will ensure the efficient implementation of your project?

DON'T: What do you think is an error when budgeting a youth media project? / What do you often think you should have done in the budgeting phase (and you didn't) ?

3. Project Fundraising Phase will provide tips, tools and suggestions about getting and managing the funds needed in order to implement and sustain the projects, and about different potential sources of funding at local, regional and European level, depending on the aim and topic of the project, and about different sustainability ideas.

Question proposals:

DO: What do you think youth organizations should consider when trying to identify/secure funding for youth media projects?

DON'T: What are potential risk factors in obtaining/managing funds for youth media projects? What are the usual motives for what youth projects don't get funding?

4. Project Implementation and Coordination Phase

will provide good examples and ideas about the project activities that need to be carried out within the project's timeframe and budget, and it will answer other questions like recruitment of young people, cooperation with other stakeholders, volunteers, mentors, etc. Also, the content of training, practice and relevant project activities for young people will be exemplified here.

Question proposals:

DO: How do you recruit young people, volunteers, mentors etc? How do you combine attractive activities with more technical, goal-oriented activities? (best practices for activities will come from project proposals / reports)

DON'T: How do you minimize the drop-out rate in your target group? What activities do you think should be avoided in youth media projects?

5. Project Communications and Visibility Phase will provide answers to questions about the project's visibility and communication. We will include tools and good examples for developing a comprehensive communication plan to determine the target audience, communication methods, and varied promotion channels that could be used.

Question proposals:

DO: What do you think is most important for ensuring a project's visibility? (best practices for communication plans will come from project proposals/ reports)

DON'T: What do you think should be avoided when planning project communication or when communicating with news media/ on social media about the project?

6. Project Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluation Phase will guide the youth organizations on how to document and evaluate the project's results, to learn from mistakes and successes, communicate with donors and audience by developing efficient evaluation and reporting tools and mechanisms.

Question proposals:

DO: What are, in your experience, the best (quantifiable) indicators of a project's success? What are the non-quantifiable results that prove a project's success? (best practices for activities will come from project proposals / reports)

DON'T: What do you think are the common errors that prevent an efficient evaluation process of a youth project?

Appendix 2. Interview guide - NGOs capacity building

The below questions are designed to guide the discussion in a semi-structured interview with three NGOs.

1. Can you tell me about your organization and its mission?
2. How does your organization currently address media literacy among youth?
3. How do you choose what topics to focus on in your projects?
4. Why do you think media literacy is important for young people?
5. In your opinion, what are some of the key skills and knowledge areas that young people need to develop in order to be media literate?
6. How do you see the relation between media literacy and civic engagement?
7. How does your organization build capacity to fill your role as a promotor of youth media literacy?
8. Are there any areas where you feel your organization could improve its capacity-building efforts around youth media literacy?
9. What kind of support or resources would be helpful in enhancing your organization's capacity-building efforts around youth media literacy?