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## Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy by Ulla Carlsson

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### Abstract

This review examines the book titled *Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy*, edited by Ulla Carlsson, which underscores the pivotal role of media and information literacy (MIL) in fostering democratic engagement, social justice, and civic empowerment in a media-saturated era. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, this book synthesizes perspectives from education, political science, and media studies to explore the evolving role of MIL within digital transformations. The book's central idea aligns with UNESCO's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing MIL's potential to bridge digital divides, combat misinformation, and foster active citizenship across diverse multimedia landscapes. The review underscores the book's strengths, particularly its effective integration of MIL within democratic frameworks. It also identifies areas for further scholarly exploration, such as expanding empirical research and including perspectives beyond the Global North. Overall, Carlsson's work provides critical insights for academics, policymakers, and educators, emphasizing the importance of implementing MIL as a foundational component of democratic societies.

**Keywords:** Media and Information Literacy, digital democracy, social justice, civic engagement, disinformation, digital citizenship, UNESCO, global perspectives, media literacy education, democratic participation.

### 1. Introduction

*Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy*, edited by Ulla Carlsson (Carlsson, 2019), is a comprehensive study of the increasing significance of MIL in a contemporary media-saturated world. Published by UNESCO, the book discusses the concept of MIL as a critical component of democratic engagement and provides insights into how media consumption, analysis, and production contribute to preserving democratic values in the age of digital transformation. The book emphasizes the MIL's potential to promote active citizenship while addressing digital divides and disinformation challenges. This review provides an analysis of the book's strengths, themes, and the opportunities it offers for further development.

### 2. Material and methods

Each three parts of the book deals with a particular aspect of MIL: Part 1 underscores the MIL conceptual framework, its evolution, and its role in advancing social justice and democracy; Part 2 addresses the Sweden's experience with MIL is examined as an essential tool for promoting democracy, serving as a compelling case study that underscores the practical implications of MIL initiatives in educational environments and everyday life. Meanwhile, Part 3 adopts a global

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perspective, considering MIL in the broader context of global social change and its significant relevance to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2015). These Parts work together to emphasize the growing need for MIL to ensure citizens can critically engage with media, distinguish between credible and false information, and actively participate in democratic processes, regardless of geographical location, professional and educational background, national identities, and values.

Led by Carlsson, the book (Carlsson, 2019) contributors argue that MIL is more than just a technical skill; it is an essential component of active citizenship in the digital era that equips learners with skills such as critically assessing, producing, and sharing media content across various digital platforms. The book's well-organized structure facilitates a comprehensive exploration of MIL from a variety of perspectives, thereby underscoring its critical importance for the well-being of contemporary democratic societies; this methodologically rigorous approach not only renders the text accessible to academic audiences but also equips media education practitioners with invaluable, actionable insights that can be effectively implemented in their work.

### 3. Discussion and Results

The interdisciplinary approach is one of the key strengths of this book, which brings together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners from various fields, who are called upon to create practical tools aimed at enhancing media competence among individuals, including preparing citizens to combat disinformation in all its forms (Buckingham, 2003, 2015; Fedorov, 2018; Jolls, Johnsen, 2018; Masterman, 2013; Potter, 2022). This diversity of perspectives enhances the book's authority and ensures that the discussion of MIL is not limited to a purely academic context. It offers readers a comprehensive understanding of how MIL operates at the intersection of education, politics, and media, including case studies, practical examples, and theoretical discussions for effective function.

Of particular note is the book's chapters' emphasis on social justice. Part I is devoted to UNESCO's media and information literacy framework, emphasizing that media literacy (ML) is more than just media consumption (UNESCO, 2013). Contributors say it involves comprehensive skill sets, including media content access, evaluation, creation, and communication across various formats. In Carlsson (Carlsson, 2019) article *MIL in the Cause of Social Justice and Democratic Rule*, the author emphasizes that MIL is a matter of increasing people's media competence and a tool to combat inequality, disinformation, and exclusion. The author discusses how MIL can be used to address gender, socioeconomic, and racial issues, which is timely and relevant.

The author contends that freedom of expression and access to diverse, reliable information are essential for democratic governance, emphasizing that MIL should be incorporated into a comprehensive democracy strategy. This broad conceptualization of MIL, which aligns well with the current understanding of digital literacy in academic literature (Hobbs, 2018; Livingstone, 2018; Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2021), is one of the book's greatest strengths, validating its arguments and strengthening its credibility that MIL should be viewed as a *right*, not a *privilege*, for citizen engagement and democratic participation, particularly in pursuing equality, especially gender equality and social justice.

One of the central insights from this book is Carlsson's emphasis on a holistic approach to analyzing recognized manipulation techniques in her article *Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age*. Along with Levitskaya and Fedorov (Levitskaya, Fedorov 2021), the author believes that equipping learners with the ability to recognize manipulation techniques is essential to combating media manipulation and promoting informed, critical engagement with media in democratic contexts where the public needs access to accurate information for meaningful civic engagement (Carlsson, 2019).

Guy Berger's contribution, *Whither MIL: Thoughts for the Road Ahead*, advocates for expanding MIL to encompass digital literacy, regarding understanding how algorithms shape the received information since the traditional understanding of MIL is no longer sufficient. These insights are valuable as they highlight the importance of teaching individuals to assess the media content critically and understand the structures (e.g., algorithms) that influence the content they are exposed to. Berger's views align with Masterman's *Voices of Media Literacy* when the author emphasizes empowering individuals through critical thinking and fostering autonomous, critical engagement with media (Masterman, 2013).

As discussed in Part II, examining MIL within the Swedish context supports the book's central argument that MIL is essential for individuals trying to navigate the complexities of today's

media environment. This section illustrates how MIL fosters critical engagement with media and enhances democratic participation in social contexts. The authors explore how MIL equips citizens with skills to participate more actively in democratic processes by enabling them to critically assess the credibility of the information they encounter. In the article *Mapping Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in Sweden: Public Policies, Activities, and Stakeholders*, Martina Wagner discusses Sweden's strategy for integrating MIL into its educational and policy frameworks.

The country takes a proactive approach by incorporating MIL into school curricula and launching public awareness campaigns. This argument is consistent with contemporary research (Feijoo et al., 2021; Jolls, 2019; Gabdullina, 2024) that shows that media-literate people are more likely to engage in political life through digital platforms. Focusing on real-world examples, such as the digitalization of education in Sweden and the integration of MIL into the national curriculum, provides concrete evidence of how MIL can be effectively implemented. Including data from surveys provides a solid empirical basis for the claims made by the authors.

Another strength of the book is its recognition of the tension between free speech and the need to regulate harmful content. This discussion is particularly relevant, considering the ongoing debates about combating misinformation and hate speech in digital spaces while protecting freedom of expression. The contributors acknowledge the importance of media freedom but emphasize that MIL plays a crucial role in mitigating the harms associated with unregulated information flows. Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin's chapter, *How Do You Trust? On Infrastructural Meaning-Making and the Need for Self-reflection* emphasizes the importance of trust in our information-saturated world. Trust in the sources of information, the platforms that distribute it, and the underlying infrastructures of media distribution are essential for a critical understanding of and engagement with digital media. Their contribution is significant because it links MIL to the larger conversation about trust and credibility. This is especially relevant in an era marked by fake news and disinformation, which lead to political propaganda and misleading advertising and increase distrust in public institutions and media organizations (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020).

Novak's contribution, *Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age*, offers a forward-looking analysis of a national, coordinated effort to advance MIL within an evolving digital environment. The author emphasizes the need for a robust media literacy framework that empowers individuals to navigate content critically and responsibly in diverse and sometimes restrictive environments. While Nowak emphasizes structural and policy-driven frameworks, Jolls (Jolls, 2019) describes the inherent tension between media freedom and censorship, arguing that IR must engage with the complexities of content appropriateness. This multifaceted focus enriches the media literacy discourse by integrating Nowak's advocacy for coordinated policy approaches with Jolls's analysis of community-oriented issues that impact the effectiveness of media literacy in digital contexts.

In Part III, the authors acknowledge the need for MIL education to evolve with new media formats, including social media platforms, algorithms, and the complexities of big data. Grizzle and Hamada's contribution to *Media and Information Literacy Expansion (MILX) Reaching Global Citizens with MIL and Other Social Competencies* introduces the MIL Expansion (MILX) concept, which seeks to extend the traditional parameters of MIL by integrating essential social competencies such as digital literacy, intercultural communication, and civic engagement. The contributors state that in an increasingly globalized context, MIL must demonstrate adaptability and be seamlessly integrated into all educational frameworks to adequately prepare global citizens for the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century. The authors provide various examples illustrating MILX initiatives in different geographic settings, demonstrating how communities adapt and contextualize MIL to local needs. The authors present various examples illustrating MILX initiatives across diverse geographical settings, showcasing how communities adapt and contextualize MIL to local needs.

Potter (Potter, 2022) asserts that while core components of media literacy, like critical thinking, media analysis, and the ability to access, evaluate, and produce media content, are primarily consistent, differing emphases result in varying interpretations and practices. Broadening the definitional scope to encompass skills requisite for global citizenship renders it particularly salient for educators and policymakers operating within international contexts (Jenkins, 2016; Yelubayeva et al., 2023).

The strength of this section is its call for an expanded focus on digital citizenship. The authors argue that in the digital age, citizenship must extend beyond traditional political

engagement to include ethical participation in online communities. This argument resonates with contemporary discussions about digital citizenship (Buckingham, 2015; Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis, 2018), emphasizing the importance of teaching individuals how to consume and evaluate information critically and contribute to the digital sphere responsibly and ethically (Jenkins, 2016; Joll, 2019; Yelubayeva, Mustafina, 2020).

The book excels in many areas, but there are opportunities for improvement. One critique is that while it emphasizes the critical need for MIL as a tool for democratic engagement, a more thorough integration of recent empirical studies could have further supported its claims. For instance, Mihailidis and Viotty's (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017) research suggests that MIL education significantly fosters young people's critical thinking and civic engagement. Including such studies would have provided more substantial evidence for the book's arguments, helping readers understand how MIL can effectively achieve the democratic outcomes the authors advocate.

Another area for improvement in Part II is the depth of analysis concerning digital disinformation. Although the book discusses the challenges posed by fake news and propaganda, it could have drawn on empirical studies measuring the effectiveness of MIL in countering disinformation. Research by Guess et al. (Guess et al., 2019) and Fedorov (Fedorov, 2019) indicates that interventions to improve media literacy can significantly reduce susceptibility to false information. Incorporating these studies would have strengthened the book's argument that MIL is a viable solution to spreading disinformation. This would have provided readers with evidence-based insights into successful MIL interventions, enhancing the book's practical value.

Despite its comprehensive approach, the book heavily emphasizes the Global North, particularly Sweden. While the Swedish experience offers valuable lessons, the book could have further addressed the challenges of implementing MIL in different cultural and political contexts, especially in the Global South. Although the Swedish case is well-documented, including data from countries with varying levels of media literacy—such as those in Eastern Europe, Asia, or Sub-Saharan Africa—would have provided a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with MIL. For instance, recent studies on the impact of MIL in post-authoritarian societies could illustrate how it serves as a tool for civic empowerment and social cohesion in fragile democracies. This gap is particularly noticeable in Part III, where a broader global perspective could have included more detailed discussions on how MIL can be adapted to meet the unique challenges faced by countries with limited technology and media resources.

#### 4. Conclusion

*"Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy"* thoroughly examines MIL's role in fostering critical thinking, social justice, and democratic participation. The contributors offer essential insights on how MIL can be incorporated into educational and policy frameworks, with a specific focus on the context of Sweden. The book has many strengths but would be improved by including a more global perspective and further empirical research. Overall, it serves as an essential resource for social scholars, policymakers, youth workers, activists, and other representatives of civil society who want to understand the transformative potential of MIL in the digital age.

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