CREATING A BETTER INTERNET FOR ALL

HOW TO INCLUDE AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE GROUPS?

POLICY BRIEF

Not everyone has the access, means or skills to participate fully in our digital society. Therefore, we feel it is important to improve our media literacy initiatives so that they better meet the needs and expectations of digitally and socially vulnerable audiences.

Our question was the following: How can our media literacy initiatives include and support vulnerable groups? In the framework of the European project 'Belgian Better Internet Consortium (B-BICO)', CSEM, Média Animation and Mediawijs brought together professionals, practitioners and experts between March and November 2021 to discuss this question. During these «Betternet Labs», professionals from the sectors of digital inclusion, poverty, literacy and media literacy were invited to testify about the social and digital inequalities their beneficiaries are facing and to reflect on how media literacy could address them. Secondly, during a second Betternetlab, we more specifically examined the issue of supervision of children's media practices within vulnerable families[1].

These meetings allowed us to identify nine main recommendations addressed to policy makers and education stakeholders.

WWW.B-BICO.BE

[1]The reports of these two Betternet Labs, the methodology used and the resulting pre-recommendations are available online at: www.b-bico.be

4 WAYS TO IMPROVE MEDIA LITERACY FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

During the first Betternet Lab, the invited professionals asked themselves: how can media literacy contribute to reducing digital and social inequalities?

And more importantly: what needs to be done to achieve this?

1 Adapting digital tools and services to specific needs

An easily accessible digital environment is essential. If the design and development of websites, applications and other digital tools meet the needs of different vulnerable audiences, they are more likely to use them. This means anticipating user expectations and making the interface as ergonomic, intuitive, user-friendly and inclusive as possible.

2 Reinforcing learning about and through digital technologies in the school curriculum and throughout life

Integrating digital technologies into the school curriculum helps children to become accustomed to using media from an early age. Secondly, lifelong media literacy learning should be encouraged by increasing the diversity and number of training schemes, using active and inclusive methodologies adapted to the characteristics of socially vulnerable audiences.

3 Improving and developing tools that will further integrate media literacy in the teaching of digital skills

Media literacy has many aspects and the technical use of tools is only one of them. Thinking about the impact of the media, understanding how advertising works and developing a critical attitude towards the media are equally important. This is why we should stimulate the integration of media literacy into digital literacy programmes by improving existing training materials and developing new educational resources. Using online technologies can be a way to introduce media literacy, showing how online technologies can empower and support people in their daily lives. Then, it is a matter of deepening the subject by addressing media criticism and its impact.

4 Recognising and supporting the role of "digital helpers".

Many professionals willingly take on the role of 'digital helper" for those who are digitally left behind. The tasks, energy and time they devote to this role should be better recognised and integrated into their job profile, with specialised training and working time arrangements. This would allow trained professionals to give more attention to those who need it.

5 WAYS TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE PARENTS IN EDUCATING THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY

Ideally, media literacy education should start at an early age. Parents have a key role to play in this, but this is not always easy for those who are digitally challenged themselves. This is why the second Betternet Lab focused on the issue of parental support for digital practices following exploratory workshops conducted within several literacy groups.

1 Creating accessible, understandable and visual learning resources

Interactive pedagogical resources can help professionals to better communicate the challenges of media literacy to their beneficiaries who do not master French or undergoing literacy education. The use of clear and concise language, strong visual elements, short URLs and videos is encouraged. There is also value in having practical, visual and experience-based 'turnkey' tools rather than purely digital resources. These tools can be shared with parents in individual sessions, for example, as guidance and information provided by a professional seems more appropriate and welcome for these audiences than processing information independently.

2 Taking into account the specific characteristics of vulnerable groups

Media educators may experience difficulties in reaching parents whose mother tongue is not French. They may, for example, not be able to make childcare arrangements for their children in order to be able to attend information sessions and the language barrier may cause communication problems. In addition, this is a very diverse audience with different needs and concerns, for whom discussing «digital issues» is not usually a priority. Flexibility is therefore essential when trying to reach these parents, offering personalised solutions that are accessible to everyone.

3 Fostering the development of media and social literacy skills in parents

If we want to involve parents in supervising their children's media practices, it is necessary to provide them with certain skills that they will need. These include technical skills (What is a QR code? How to use such and such a software?), as well as critical thinking skills (How to deal with all that can be read online?) and finally social skills (How to talk to children about media? How to encourage dialogue with them?) In addition, discussing other major stages of psychosocial development in childhood and adolescence with them can be a good way of initiating a discussion on the media literacy needs of children and young people.
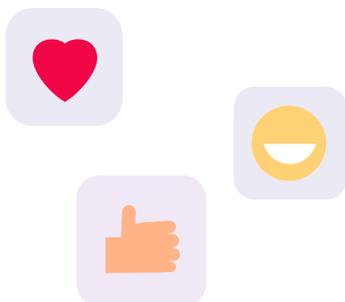
4 Encouraging parents to better understand their children's digital environment

The digital environment of children and young people is constantly changing. Depending on their age, their digital needs, interests and skills differ. At the same time, new tools and media will continue to emerge. Media literacy would be easier to achieve for parents if they can understand how their children are growing up with media and are aware of what is happening in their digital world. In addition to regular discussions with their children, parents also need the support of informative tools[2]. Furthermore, bringing parents and children together in joint information sessions can be fruitful in order to encourage discussion about the children's media use. Another way would be to give children the role of the expert: highlighting their knowledge of online media issues and having parents learn directly from their children.

5 Providing parents with guidelines to better understand their children's media literacy

Even if parents are aware of the importance of media literacy, they do not always know how and where to start. Clear guidelines can help them in their initiative. These guidelines should address both the benefits and the risks of digital media, and highlight the beneficial aspects of activities that they might tend to consider as negative (waste of time, etc.). In addition, parents should be encouraged to create the framework for regulating these uses with their children, to explore together the playful or social side of the media, to talk regularly about the media in the family, etc.

[2]The parentsconnectes.be and medianest.be websites are examples of informative tools to start to this discussion.