

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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# Foreword

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## A European Approach to Media Literacy: Moving toward an Inclusive Knowledge Society

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[www.ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/media-literacy](http://www.ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/media-literacy)

Some 50 years ago, 6 European countries (Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) signed the Treaty of Rome<sup>1</sup> creating the European Economic Community. The idea was for people, goods and services to circulate freely across borders. But the real concern was bringing together the nations and people of Europe. We should never forget that the historical roots of the European Union lie in an overwhelming tragedy: the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Europeans decided they would do anything to prevent such killing and destruction from ever happening again. Now the European Union embraces 27 countries from Portugal in the very West of the continent to the new Member States, Romania and Bulgaria, from the polar circle to the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. Europe has almost half a billion citizens with many different languages, cultures and traditions but also with deeply shared values of democracy, freedom and social justice. The European Union is against any discrimination based on ethnic origin, sex and philosophical belief. In its relations with international partners, the EU projects the values that have contributed to its own success. The prosperity of the EU has grown out of a particular form of regional cooperation, which has developed hand in hand with a deeper political commitment to democracy, human rights and the enhancement of citizenship. Today,

we are witnessing an unprecedented technological revolution. The meaning of «wealth» has shifted towards ownership of knowledge and information. Technological change makes it possible for virtually all people to become not only consumers but also creators of media content. The media have become an increasingly powerful economic and social force and are accessible instruments for European citizens to better understand the societies in which they live and participate in the democratic life of their community. In this context, at the Lisbon European Council<sup>2</sup> in March 2000, Heads of State and of Government set an ambitious objective for Europe: to become a more competitive knowledge economy and at the same time a more inclusive knowledge society. A higher degree of media literacy would definitely help our societies to fulfil this ambitious objective.

«Media literacy» may be defined as the ability to access the media, to understand and evaluate critically their contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts. This definition is the result of the work of many different people (institutions, media professionals, teachers, educators) and it is built on three main elements: 1) access to media and media content; 2) critical approach, ability to decipher media messages, awareness of how the media work; 3) creativity, communication and production skills. Media literacy relates to «all media», including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies. Media literacy is an extremely important factor for «active citizenship» in today's information society, a real key pre-requisite just as literacy was at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is a fundamental skill not only for the young generation but also for adults (elderly people, parents, teachers and media professionals). As a result of the evolution of media technologies and the presence of the Internet as a distribution channel, an increasing number of Europeans can now create and disseminate images, information and contents. In this context, media literacy is viewed as one of the major tools in the development of citizens' responsibilities. Media literacy relates to the «European audiovisual heritage and cultural identity». The audiovisual production sector is an essential instrument of expression of our cultural and political values. It is a vector for European citizenship and culture and plays a primary role in building a European identity. Media-literate people will be able to exercise more informed choices also with regard to the audiovisual content market. Citizens would therefore have a higher degree of freedom as they will have the instruments to choose what they want to see and will be able to better evaluate the implications of their choices. Finally, media-literate people will be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful, offensive or undesired content. Media literacy refers also to the skills, knowledge and understanding to enable citizens to use media effectively. It should empower them through critical thinking and creative «problem-solving skills» to make them informed consumers and producers of information.

The Commission adopted a «Communication on media literacy» (A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment) at the end of 2007. The Commission's initiative on media literacy responds to requests by the European Parliament and industry together with a number of Member States. Work started in

2006 with the creation of a Media Literacy Expert Group with an advisory role for the European Commission. A public consultation was held at the end of last year which showed differences in practices and levels of media literacy in Europe. The Communication stresses the importance of media in today's rapidly evolving information society and in citizens' daily life and it adds a further building block to European audiovisual policy. The Communication links to the provisions of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (article 26 introduced a reporting obligation for the Commission on levels of media literacy in all Member States) and the MEDIA 2007 programme which underlines the importance of media literacy and image education initiatives and in particular those organised by festivals for a young public. The Communication provides a European definition of media literacy (as the ability to access the media, to understand and to evaluate critically different aspects of the media and their contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts), which refers to all media and focuses on three main areas: media literacy for commercial communication, media literacy for audiovisual works and media literacy for online. By means of this policy document, the Commission intends to promote the development and exchange of good practices on media literacy in the digital environment through existing programmes and initiatives and to encourage research into criteria for assessing media literacy. The Commission also calls on Member States to encourage the authorities in charge of audiovisual and electronic communication regulation to cooperate in the improvement of the various levels of media literacy and to develop and implement codes of conduct and co-regulatory frameworks in conjunction with all interested parties at national level. Following the publication of the Commission's Communication, the other European Institutions have worked on different kinds of political documents on media literacy. In particular, a set of conclusions was adopted by the Council in May 2008; the Committee of the Region approved an Opinion in October 2008 which urges local authorities to be more active in this domain; and finally the European Parliament adopted a Report on media literacy of high political relevance. In 2009, the Commission will come forward with a Recommendation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [www.treatyofrome.com/treaty.htm](http://www.treatyofrome.com/treaty.htm).

<sup>2</sup> [www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm).