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TEENAGERS' REFLECTIONS ON MEDIA LITERACY INITIATIVES AT SCHOOL AND EVERYDAY MEDIA LITERACY DISCOURSES

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Teenagers' reflections on media literacy initiatives at school and everyday media literacy discourses

Often coined as digital natives, contemporary teens are ascribed a paradoxical status of skilled but vulnerable media users. Therefore, media literacy initiatives often target young audiences in order to mitigate detrimental media effects as well as to facilitate emancipatory media engagements. The literature on media literacy draws from diverse disciplines (e.g. educational sciences, media studies) and examines a wide range of thematic areas (e.g. privacy, news, citizenship). However, the voices of those who are the target population of media literacy policy and research are seldom heard. We identify the absence of teenagers' perceptions and experiences as a limitation in contemporary debates on media literacy. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on how teenagers give meaning to media literacy, how they perceive the contemporary discourse on the importance of media literacy for teens, and in which way they encounter concrete media literacy initiatives at school. Based on in-depth interviews with 31 high-school students between 16 and 18 year old, we found how teenagers primarily have a risk discourse in mind when talking about media literacy. Contextualizing these perceptions, it became clear that both the public discourse and media literacy initiatives largely draw from protectionist approaches.

Keywords: Teenagers; media literacy; education; discourse; emancipatory approach

Introduction

In today's media-saturated society, media literacy has gained in importance across Europe (Santos, Brites, Mourão, & Sousa, 2017). The EU Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG)[1] employs an umbrella expression and defines media literacy as *"all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it"*. This broad definition, that encompasses classic and new media and information and communications technology (ICT), clearly puts forward an

emancipatory approach and aligns with a repositioning of the media user, as argued by Livingstone (2018, p. 5),

"from passive to active, from recipient to participant, from consumer to citizen".

On a regional, national and international level a growing interest in media literacy in policy discussions can be noticed (Vanaudenhove, et al., 2018), which goes hand in hand with media education curricula and extracurricular activities directed at children and youth. In academic circles, many communication scholars and social scientists have investigated teenagers' media skills (e.g. Festl, 2020; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Metzger, et al., 2015; Tugtekin & Koc, 2020), whereas educational scientists have been more devoted into developing and evaluating educational media literacy curricula (e.g. Kohnen, Mertens, & Boehm, 2020; Pinkleton, Austin, Chen, & Cohen, 2013; Webb & Martin, 2012). Others are also focused on the political economy of media and media literacy and question the dominance of platforms and service providers and extensive responsibilization processes (e.g. De Wolf & Joye, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2007; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019). What is missing to a certain extent, we argue, is a meaningful engaging with audiences to whom media literacy initiatives are mostly targeted. Indeed, we rarely hear the voices of teenagers and their interpretations.

Following a social constructionist perspective, we believe that media literacy initiatives in schools are connected to everyday discourses about teenagers which carry norms, values and predispositions directed at them (cfr. Hall, 1992). Many scholars have previously indicated how (new) media regularly ignites moral panics, in which teens are portrayed as digital natives but also as deviant, reckless and/or unconcerned (Boyd, 2014; De Wolf & Joye, 2019; Livingstone, 2018; Marwick, 2008). Arguably, these discourses further shape the perspective of teenagers towards media literacy initiatives. In this study, we therefore interviewed teenagers (n = 31) in Flanders (the northern, Dutch- speaking part of Belgium) on their experiences with media literacy initiatives and how this aligns with their perspectives on media literacy (RQ1) as well as the general discourses and assumptions directed at them (RQ2).

Theoretical considerations

Who is defining media literacy?

Contemporary teenagers are growing up in a progressively digital-by-default society. This raises the stakes for media literacy initiatives to support teens' mediatized everyday lives. The ways media literacy is defined depends on the actors and stakeholders that are involved. Although teens can be considered key stakeholders in this debate, we rarely hear their voices. In what follows, we explore the scattered field of media literacy conceptualizations as this reveals the dominant framework that arguably guides media literacy initiatives directed at teenagers.

"Media literacy" has been widely discussed in academic circles and beyond. According to Livingstone (2018, p. 5) media literacy refers to the *"ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts".* Others, like DiMaggio et al. (2004, p. 378) refer to "Internet literacy" with a focus on *"the capacity to respond pragmatically and intuitively to challenges and opportunities in a manner that exploits the internet's potential and avoids frustration".* Ng (2012) uses the concept of "digital literacy" to indicate the multiplicity of literacies connected to all kinds of digital technologies. Addressing the oftentimes political nature of media, Kellner and Share (2007) call for a critical media literacy which should facilitate citizens' ability to recognize injustices as well as exert agency. While acknowledging the subtle differences between these conceptualizations, they all focus on the second-level digital divide, as conceptualized by Hargittai (2002), and put an emphasis on skills and abilities that allow to function in an increasingly digital-by-default society.

A multitude of conceptualizations scattered throughout an equally diverse number of domains has emerged. For example, it is argued how people, and especially teenagers, need to develop privacy literacy to know that online personal information is gathered and harvested in certain ways [knowing that] as well as skills that allow to complement cognition by action [knowing how] (Trepte et al., 2015). Ng (2012) further

proposed to add a social-emotional component, i.e. skills related to observing and applying "netiquette" which refers to using appropriate language online. Besides privacy and netiquette, it's also noticeable how literacy has been put forward with regard to mediated sexual practices performed by teenagers. Some educators and media literacy initiatives refer to the skill of making oneself unrecognizable when sharing explicit sexual content (De Ridder, 2019). Indeed, certain impressions on literacy are more normative than others.

Local, national and even international initiatives have been put forward to increase media literacy among minors. Santos et al. (2017) mapped media literacy practices and actions in Europe and provided a snapshot of various trends in media literacy projects, for which they received input of 28 EU member states. Interestingly, they found how "critical thinking" was the most addressed (403 of 547 projects) followed by "media use" skills (385 of 547 projects). In this study, critical thinking was broadly defined and encompasses skills with regard to understanding how the media industry works, the evaluation of content, online safety and security. Media use skills are more basic and refer to the ability to search, find and navigate media content and services. Every country that participated in the study of Santos et al. (2017) also provided more detailed information about five key projects in their country. Surprisingly, teens and older students were considered the primary audience in most of those projects (138 of 145 projects).

Analyzing media literacy policy, Van Audenhove et al. (2018) argued how a shift is noticeable *"from protectionist media literacy approaches towards empowerment literacy approaches"* in parliamentary discussions and government agreements. People are increasingly treated as active, willing and capable in their critical engagement with media. However, scholars have also warned for treating media literacy as a "silver-bullet solution" (Livingstone, 2018). In addition, De Wolf & Joye (2019, p. 5517) argued to be mindful towards the promise of media literacy and its "*disciplinary effect that justifies the ongoing role of users to educate themselves with new digital innovations and services"* rather than questioning individual responsabilization processes.

Over the years, the field of media literacy has grown and diversified in academia and beyond (Vanaudenhove et al., 2018). Because media literacy projects are mostly oriented towards teenagers (Santos et al., 2017), move beyond a focus on skills and knowledge but also – implicitly or explicitly – put forward notions of appropriateness (De Ridder, 2019; Ng, 2012) it is necessary, we claim, to hear the voices of those to whom media literacy projects are mostly directed. However, concepts and philosophies of media literacy components (e.g. critical thinking, empowerment) are still being defined top-down by adult experts. We therefore put forward the following research question: How do teens define media literacy and what knowledge and skills do they consider to be important? (RQ1).

The importance of media literacy for teenagers

Public discussions on the intertwinement of media in our contemporary lives often highlight how "becoming media literate" is especially important for young populations (Potter, 2013; Santos et al., 2017). In this regard, media literacy initiatives are presented as both a preventive measure and a cure for the contemporary ills of growing up in a media-ridden society (Buckingham, 2003). The appointed importance of media literacy for teenagers is discursively shaped by a pervasive hope and fear paradigm on the relationship between societal change, media and youth (Sabry & Mansour, 2019). Therefore, a cultural-historical perspective is warranted in order to understand how contemporary media literacy discourses shape and are shaped by teenagers' experiences.

In western societies, life stage categories such as youth and adulthood came into existence as products of societal transformations associated with modernity and industrialization (Durham, 2017; Sabry & Mansour, 2019). The historical work of Ariès (1962) for example illustrates how hierarchical power dynamics in the past were not so much determined by chronological age but rather by specific statuses that signified relationships between the less experienced (e.g. apprentice) and the skillful (e.g. master). From the eighteenth

century onwards, political and economic changes transformed notions of authority, labor and the family which called for a demarcated institutionalization of youth (Cole & Durham, 2007; Durham, 2017). Influenced by emerging bio-psychological notions of the life span and hegemonic religious ideas, teenagers became perceived as vulnerable, irrational, and even deviant beings in need of guidance towards adulthood (Cole & Durham, 2007; Durham, 2017; Sabry & Mansour, 2019). Both in the past and present, this assumed state of "being unfinished" fuels hopes and fears of how the ubiquitous presence of media influences young citizens and society by large (De Leyn, De Wolf, Vanden Abeele, & De Marez, 2019).

Because teenagers are seen as unfinished beings on which society has to instill its values and future potential, hopes and fears surrounding the emergence of new media forms are increasingly projected on the young as a means to grapple with media-induced societal transformations (Cole & Durham, 2007; De Leyn et al., 2019). Screen media in particular have a history of causing anxieties about its assumed corrupting potential as these shake the core foundation of traditional institutions' control over individual and collective imaginations, aesthetics and dogmatic hegemonies (Sabry & Mansour, 2019). Initially, there was a widespread belief that the unregulated availability of screen media turned people into passive and irrational audiences which *"were not to be trusted with reaping its benefits"* (Sabry & Mansour, 2019, p. 7; Van Audenhove et al., 2018).

Teenagers have been at the forefront of these discussions as they are believed to be especially susceptible for the negative influence of both media effects and institutions (Buckingham, 2003; Potter, 2013; Sabry & Mansour, 2019; Van Audenhove et al., 2018). As a result, the foundations for both a protectionist approach, including restricting access to media based on morally and legally constructed age thresholds, and the appointment of educators and caregivers as suitable socializing agents with regards to policy driven media literacy was established throughout the 20th century (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Jeffery, 2020; Wallis & Buckingham, 2013).

With the turn of the 21st century, media literacy initiatives directed at teenagers gained even more traction due to a rapid digitalization of society. The ubiquitous presence of networked and mobile technologies in teens' lives regularly ignites moral panics (Boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2018; Marwick, 2008) In these moral panics, it is assumed that media technologies have detrimental effects on teenagers' "healthy" development and that teens themselves lack the capabilities to negotiate their media use in a responsible manner (Jeffery, 2020; Marwick, 2008). However, a strict protectionist approach is simultaneously being abandoned: new media technologies are increasingly recognized as potential vectors for empowerment and people, including teenagers, are now believed to be able to engage with these in an active and creative way (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Van Audenhove et al., 2018; Wallis & Buckingham, 2013). The discourse surrounding teenagers and media literacy therefore gives rise to the paradoxical figure of the digital native: Teens are portrayed as knowledgeable and skillful media users but simultaneously imagined as a threat to themselves and society due to their "volatile" and "unhealthy" immersion in the media (Herring, 2008; Livingstone, 2018; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

Digital natives' immersion into mediatized environments give rise to several anxieties such as the endangerment of privacy online, the consequences of fake news and echo chambers, and the surge of extremist collectives (e.g. Barnes, 2006; Nienierza, Reinemann, Fawzi, Riesmeyer, & Neumann, 2019; Wohn & Bowe, 2016). Therefore, the contemporary discourse surrounding teenagers' media use remains rather negative (De Wolf & Joye, 2019; Marwick, 2008). As Peter (2003) points out, western societies are characterized by an institutional mistrust of youth which results in disciplinary interventions aimed at protecting that category against both themselves and societies' ills. We argue that the mistrust of teenagers regarding media use has cultural-historical roots and intersects with anxieties propelled by the emergence of new media. Although media literacy initiatives are now increasingly drawing from empowerment approaches, its intertwinement with negative discourses on teenagers cannot be ignored.

Considering the prevalence of these negative discourses among the general public, questions can be asked whether moral panics about teens' media use could hinder media literacy initiatives' emancipatory potential. While the scholarship oftentimes do address and reflect upon such stereotypes (e.g. De Wolf & Joye, 2019; Livingstone, 2018; Marwick, 2008), how teenagers themselves experience moral panics directed at them and how these experiences affect their perceptions and attitudes towards media literacy have rarely been explored (De Leyn et al., 2019). Therefore, we also posit the following research question: How do teenagers perceive the contemporary discourse surrounding teens and media literacy? (RQ2)

Methodology

Focus of study

While the literature on media literacy is vast and diverse, less attention has been paid to how teenagers themselves conceptualize media literacy and how they experience the contemporary discourse on the importance of media literacy for teens. Therefore, we aim to amplify teenagers' voices by exploring their perceptions and experiences of media literacy curricula. Following this aim, we conducted individual in-depth interviews with Flemish high-school students in November and December 2019.

Participants

The data of the current study were gathered as part of the Apestaartjaren project which is a bi-yearly quantitative study focusing on children's and teenagers' media ownership and uses. In collaboration with a non-profit organization, we recruited schools across all regions in Flanders, Belgium. We contacted the principals of the schools and asked if they were also willing to participate in the qualitative part of the project. In total, 8 different schools agreed to participate. They were contacted with details on the study's purpose and the principle and/or teachers further directed our question to their students.

In total, 31 participants (16 girls) were recruited from the fifth, sixth and seventh grade of the eight different high-schools. All students were aged between 16 and 18 years old. We chose to interview older teenagers because they are able to look back and reflect on their experiences with media literacy initiatives throughout their secondary education. We included students from three different educational types, being general secondary education (17 participants), technical secondary education (8 participants) and vocational secondary education (6 participants).

Procedure

Four researchers were involved in the gathering, transcribing and analyzing of the qualitative data. All interviews were conducted in the schools of the participants and lasted 43 minutes on average.

The authors' university department ethics committee provided permission for this study as we complied to the ethical standards for qualitative research with teenagers. Considering the questions about educators' role in media literacy initiatives, we made sure that the teens' teachers were not present during the interviews. Prior to each interview, the researchers explained the study's purpose and participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant signed an informed consent, which explained how the data from the study would be handled. The participants' data were pseudonymized, i.e. the names of the respondents were removed from the transcripts and replaced by a different name to respect their anonymity and privacy. The audio fragments were treated confidentially and stored securely. As the interviews prompted discussions about media literacy and media use in general, we anticipated that potential sensitive topics (e.g. being a victim of sexting) could come up during our conversations. In such cases, we made sure to respect the participants' boundaries as the well-being of teens should always be a priority over the research goals.

The interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide which was constructed by the four researchers responsible for the data collection and analysis. Although the researchers are specialized in different thematic

areas (privacy, citizenship and news), the topic guide was shaped to explore media literacy in general as this topic bridges the interests of the different researchers. Each interview commenced with a conversation about the participants' media use. Afterwards, we asked whether participants have heard of the term "media literacy" and their initial reflections on this concept. We aimed to further facilitate participants' reflections by both inquiring how media literacy is relevant to their own engagements with media and by showing the definition of media literacy as put forward by the Flemish government's policy2. Moreover, we explored how teenagers experience the contemporary discourse by asking them whether they think that adults (e.g. teachers, parents) attach importance to media literacy for teens. Finally, the teens were asked to look back on how media literacy was educated throughout their curricula in high-school.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the four interviewers. Afterwards, the data were analyzed using NVivo12. In our analyses, we combined a thematic and general inductive approach. First, the researchers constructed an initial code scheme (Table 1) based on the themes in the topic guide and by reading the raw data. The interviews were then divided between the different researchers who used the code scheme in their analyses. In the latter stage of analyses, the code scheme was discussed and refined on a regular basis by the researchers through inductive addition of codes for each general theme.

Results

Teenagers' conceptualizations of media literacy

The results reveal a sharp contrast between teenagers' primary associations and deeper reflections regarding media literacy. Their first reflections favored the knowledge component of media literacy over specific skills, attitudes and the emancipatory potential of media use. The 16 year old Laurence, for example, illustrated this recurring sentiment by comparing media literacy to knowledge-based mathematic formulas:

Laurence: *"I think that media literacy is about how much you are thinking about or being occupied with media so the literacy is actually like … Similar to literacy about mathematics, like how many formulas you know, there is something similar that you can have about media".*
Interviewer: *"So your knowledge about media?"*
Laurence: *"Yes, your knowledge and especially what you know about the dangers media poses".*

Participants' emphasis on the importance of knowledge about media seems to stem from their perception that media constitutes a risky and even dangerous environment. For these teenagers, media literacy is primarily associated with a risk discourse similar to protectionist's assumptions about the relationship between people, society and media. The participants believe that media, and social media in particular, have negative effects and that these effects should be mitigated by facilitating knowledge about potential risks. According to 18 year old Kelly for instance, media literacy should induce "responsible" behavior by creating awareness about the dangers of disclosing explicit content:

Kelly: *"I think that media literacy learns you how to deal with smartphones, how you can use it responsibly and also what the possible disadvantages are. For example, that you have to be careful with what you post [on social media].*
Interviewer: *"You say using it responsibly and knowing what you shouldn't do. What could that be according to yourself?"*
Kelly: *"Sometimes there are girls who post pictures of themselves half-naked or in their swimsuit. I mean, I don't think that you should post these kind of things but that's just my opinion".*
Interviewer: *"OK, considering these pictures, how do you think media literacy could contribute?"*
Kelly: *"By making them aware to be careful. That everyone can see these pictures and potentially be abused".*

Similar to Kelly, other teenagers in this study stress that awareness is instrumental for avoiding media risks. In these accounts, it is striking how they expect that increasing knowledge about media will result in refraining from displaying certain behaviors that are perceived as irresponsible and reckless (De Ridder, 2017). Kevin for example, notes that media literacy facilitates knowledge about *"what you better shouldn't do on the internet".* In a similar vein, Roeland states that *"media literacy is about being careful what you post [on*

social media]" and that *"you don't post dumb things because everyone can see it".* Overall, the commonality in participants' primary reflections of media literacy highlights knowledge, safety, and individual responsibilization.

With regards to specific topics that these high school students associate with media literacy, social privacy [privacy vis-à-vis other individuals] issues were in most cases mentioned spontaneously. Moreover, the topics of fake news, cyberbullying and digital addiction were popular themes through which the teenagers conceptualized media literacy as awareness about media risks. In line with their primary protectionist reflections on media literacy, the teenagers condemned peers who "overshare", appointed responsibility to victims of non-consensual sexting, described individuals who believe fake news as naïve and uneducated, and believe that being pre-occupied with online media is detrimental to one's mental health. As the 18 year old Emma explains, young media users should be confronted with these negative media effects in order to instill "media literate" behavior:

Emma: *"It's really necessary to make them aware [of the consequences of sexting]. Because I think that there are definitely boys and girls who committed suicide when they got bullied because of it. Something that makes it really clear to them. Maybe something similar to smokers who are exposed to pictures of black damaged lungs so they know they have to quit".*

These initial conceptualizations of media literacy in terms of detrimental effects and risks were rather surprising considering participants' nuanced descriptions of how they use media in everyday life. Indeed, the teenagers expressed a more positive relationship with media as they talked about how they perceive and appropriate media as a useful resource to be informed, communicate with friends, fulfill school assignments and "simply" have fun (cfr. Ito et al., 2009). Throughout the interviews, we prompted high school students to go beyond their primary assumptions on what media literacy entails by both showing them the definition that

is used to guide media literacy policy in Flanders, which includes specific references to creative, active and empowering media use, and by encouraging them to reflect on how media literacy applies to them specifically. While a protectionist discourse focusing on media risks might be salient on participants' top of mind, it became clear during these conversations that teenagers recognize media literacy's empowering components in their own media use and deem them equally important. Our conversation with Martijn, a passionate skater, is illustrative in this regard. Martijn recognized himself in the definition's section highlighting skills and creativity as he referred to a skate network application he uses to edit and share video clips of himself performing skate tricks:

Martijn: *"Yeah of course if you are creative, I have to be creative. It's not only about what I do in the video clip but also the practical part [making the video clip]. For example, there are already so many videos about [skating] so it's important to develop your own style.*

Moreover, participants elaborated on what they understand as media literate attitudes that contribute to a safe and agreeable mediatized environment in which they wish to participate. These conceptualized attitudes center on a form of "netiquette" that facilitates cordial interactions with others on social media. Sarah for example, stressed the importance of *"checking what you post so that it doesn't come over as shocking or hurtful to people who can see your message".* Restating the importance of creating a cordial online environment, Monica voiced a similar sentiment to Sarah when she described media literacy as a certain way of formulating opinions in an "appropriate manner":

Monica: *"It's about sharing your opinion with others in an appropriate manner. So no swear words because swear words are not necessary to define your opinion".*
Interviewer: *"And what do you understand by 'an appropriate manner'?"*

Monica: *"An appropriate manner, so when you don't like something for example, you don't even have to voice this, you can just ignore it or don't like it. But if you have seen something bad, something that you didn't like about religion or whatsoever, that you react in an appropriate manner instead of name calling others".*

Next to creative media use and attitudes towards cordial networked interactions, some participants endured in highlighting the importance of the knowledge component of media literacy. However, it was noticeable how their focus shifted from typical "adolescent themes" to broader "media issues" and how their discourse now questioned individual responsibilization. These teenagers indicated that information about data collection and processing practices should gain more focus as they find it difficult to comprehend how private companies and governments keep track of people's movements. Nick for example, stressed the need for education about institutional privacy [privacy vis-à-vis third parties] as he noticed that young people tend to "look for the pleasant things" in media but that it doesn't mean that they know everything about how companies collect data "when making an account and filling everything in". Sam shares a similar opinion but he does not think that media literate individuals would be able to change these practices by just being aware of the data collection process:

Sam: *"I think that you should have media literacy, but I don't really have control myself to be honest. You could decide to block or quit your account but you had it at some point so it [data] doesn't disappear. It has been saved somewhere".*
Interviewer: *"What do you mean with not having control yourself?"*
Sam: *"I think that Facebook really stores it [data] somewhere like; 'that person loves to go out with his friends, this person plays basketball' and so on. You aren't really able to say 'stop and now it's over with my account and I'm going to delete posts.' It has been saved somewhere".*

Perceptions of contemporary discourse

In the past and the present, discourses surrounding teenagers and media literacy are often characterized by anxieties about the interactions between teens' assumed vulnerability and media's detrimental effects (cf. Marwick, 2008). During the interviews, the participants did indeed claim that adults worry about teens' media engagements and therefore belief that media literacy is especially relevant for youths. However, these teenagers did not necessarily criticize this belief. On the contrary, in accordance with their primary association of media literacy with a protectionist discourse, most teens in this study agreed that initiatives are necessary for young people in order to use media in a responsible manner:

Brecht: *"I think that adults attach greater importance to media literacy than young people because adults are also more aware of the fact that you better don't put your information on Facebook or Instagram".*
Interviewer: *"And do you think that adults also believe that it's important for young people like you to take an interest in media literacy?"*
Brecht: *"Yes, my mom for example thinks that we are kind of too playful, that we click on stuff without thinking and that we are occupied with [silly] things [online]. So yeah, I think that they would be happy if we would learn about media literacy".*
Interviewer: *"And do you think yourself that there is a difference between adults and youths?"*
Brecht: *"I think so yes. Older people are older and wiser. I guess that they also have more knowledge about the consequences [of media use], they consider it more often than us, than people of our age".*

Although teenagers like Brecht agree with the assumption that young people need media literacy in order to "behave responsibly", it is also important to note that they sometimes experience the contemporary discourse as a stereotypical portrayal of their engagements with media. Rob for example, expressed frustration over the fact that his parents claim that he is addicted to his smartphone. He reported to be especially bothered by the assumption that he displays addictive behavior while he primarily uses his smartphone to socialize with friends. According to Rob, his parents' accusation of him being addicted is unwarranted as he notes that *"some adults are as bad as children"* when it comes to the frequency of their

media use. A similar opinion was voiced by Hannah who lamented the tendency of adults to overemphasize "the negative" while "the positive" of media is often neglected:

Hannah: *"Sometimes I'm reading an article [on my smartphone], most of the times I'm scrolling on Facebook but when I see something interesting, then I'm really reading it. And there often is a reaction like 'she's preoccupied with her phone again' [derogatory tone] while it could be similar to reading a book. So in my opinion, it's not all useless what we do [on our phone] and it doesn't add anything [to point out that I'm on my phone]"*

More often, participants did not experience the contemporary discourse as particularly stereotypical. Overall, they seem to agree with and actively reproduce the image of teenagers as "unfinished beings" (cf. De Leyn et al., 2019), who lack skills and experience to effectively move within a mediatized world. However, the teens in this study distanced themselves from the category of youth while making these claims. They believe that "other youths", such as peers and especially younger teenagers and children, should be the target population of media literacy programs. When asked if they personally would benefit from being informed about media literacy, participants emphasized that they are aware of the dangers and that they do have knowledge about how media works. Subsequently, media literacy programs were perceived to bring less benefit to them in comparison to peers who are portrayed as "unaware" or "reckless" and younger populations who are believed to be "naïve" and "vulnerable":

Interviewer: *"And do you actually think that it's important for young people to be informed about media literacy?"*
Monica: *"For young people yes, I mean for little children for sure".*
Interviewer: *"Little children?"*
Monica: *"Yes for those who start [with social media]. My 12 year old sister for instance, she just made her Instagram account and I'm already afraid for what might happen [. . .] Because I know already what you can see on social media. Because of that, I try to make sure that she keeps her distance and that she doesn't engage with it too much, that she doesn't see too much, or that she wouldn't be influenced too much".*

[. . .]

Interviewer: *"So you think that media literacy is something important for younger children?"*

Monica: *"Yes it's important indeed! I mean, me and my classmates for example, we are already older and we have more knowledge. We have grown up with social media so we know more than those little ones. That's why there needs to be more attention directed towards those who are younger".*

Similar to Monica, the high school students regard younger teenagers as more vulnerable and less able to mitigate media risks. The interaction between these perceptions and protectionist understandings of media literacy potentially shapes the participants' belief that media literacy initiatives should not necessarily be directed towards their own age group. It is remarkable that these teenagers thus reproduce the same linear assumptions about the life span through which they selves are being ascribed a less-developed position in comparison to adults. Namely, that younger populations are socio-biological "less developed" and therefore more inclined to display reckless media behaviors.

Media literacy at school

In order to contextualize teenagers' understandings of media literacy and how they perceive the contemporary discourse, we explored which kind of media literacy initiatives they encountered at school and how they experienced these. In most instances, students recalled initiatives that were aimed at improving digital skills such as looking up information and directed towards strengthening E-safety by creating awareness of online risks. Concerning E-safety, participants reported that these conversations were held sporadically when a case of cyberbullying plagued their school. Moreover, some teenagers remembered how certain teachers gave informal advice about "what not to post" on social media. In the case of girl participants, it was noticeable how they mainly remembered being exposed to documentaries or theatre plays that display victimization stories of youths who engaged in sexting. As Monica narrates, this has left a lasting impression and has prompted her to be extra conscious about what she shares through digital means:

Monica: *"I still remember a video from a few years ago that was about exposing or something. And it gave me a different direction in some way, like my opinion [changed]. My parents always told me 'don't post revealing pictures of yourself on media' and after that video I got it, like that's why I can't post these things".*
Interviewer: *"Which kind of video was that?"*
Monica: *"I don't know, it was like a campaign, a campaign video but I don't remember the name. But it was about a girl and a boy and they were in a relationship and so the boy asked for revealing pictures but she was reluctant at first but he put so much pressure on her that she thought that he wouldn't like her anymore when she wouldn't send the pictures. So she did, and then these pictures spread throughout her school".*
Interviewer: *"And you said that you started to think about this possibility afterwards?"*
Monica: *"Yeah I did. So these kind of small things can cause a lot of drama. Especially for girls".*

Overall, participants deemed the school environment as appropriate to learn about media literacy. The question "who" should educate them, however, incited diverse responses ranging from teachers to experts. With regards to teachers, the teenagers in this study made a distinction between different "types" of teachers. The types that are perceived as most suitable to provide information about media literacy are characterized by young age on the one hand and by having a good and confidential relationship with their students on the other hand. These teachers are believed to have a better understanding of how media works and of youths' mediatized worlds. The type of teacher that is seen as less appropriate to inform students about media literacy is less clear. Although the participants oftentimes allude to the older age of teachers when talking about this type, more often these teachers are portrayed as anti-media and less knowledgeable than teenagers themselves:

Interviewer: *"You said something about teachers, do you think that teachers are able to talk with young people about media literacy?"*
Martijn: *"Some of them, yes especially the younger teachers. Until 39, 40 year old but above that, totally not".*
Interviewer: *"Why not an older teacher?"*
Martijn: *"They don't even know what media is. And they just can't deal with media. They can't give good examples because they don't use it themselves. And that's why they can't empathize with these situations because they don't get it. And then it's not really useful [to hear their advice]. Younger teachers can*

[empathize] because they use it themselves, they also experience it, they use media because they are younger".

Interviewer: *"And do you think that these teachers can understand young people's lifeworld?"*

Martijn: *"Yes but again the younger teachers. Because the older [teachers] always refer to some life wisdoms and then you think 'just leave me alone'. With my younger teachers, I just have a better relationship".*

Next to teachers, participants expressed the need for external experts to come to their school and talk about media. Just as Kelly, most teenagers indicate that they would attach great value to professionals who study how the media and its effects work: *"I would like it if an expert visited our school and explains to us what the dangers are".* The need for an expert seems to be shaped by participants' protectionist understandings of media literacy. Because of the complex and dangerous nature of media, teens believe that an expert could provide clear guidelines on how to use media safely. In a similar vein, these protectionist assumptions give rise to the figure of the expert who lived themselves through the devastating effects of media. Nadia's comparison to a recovered drug addict who visits schools to spread awareness is telling about how these teenagers internalized a media effect discourse:

Nadia: *"In my opinion, someone suitable to talk about media is someone who had similar experiences as drug addicts actually and is now like 'wow, I've been addicted all this time'. I think that's the best approach, someone who tells about their own addiction, who had this experience".*

Discussion

In contemporary society, media technologies are deeply inscribed in both the intimate and public sphere. Therefore, "acquiring media literacy" is increasingly deemed important for people as a means to empower themselves through mediated entertainment, communication, news consumption, civic participation, education and labor (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Van Audenhove et al., 2018; Wallis & Buckingham, 2013). The importance of media literacy for teenagers is especially highlighted because young audiences are seen as avid but vulnerable

navigators of media environments (Buckingham, 2003; Herring, 2008; Livingstone, 2018; Potter, 2013). Despite the focus on teens' media use in scholarly and policy debates, media literacy conceptualizations and initiatives are mostly constructed top-down by "adult experts". Therefore we amplified the voices of teens in this study.

Main results & reflections

The results illustrate first of all how the teenagers primarily have a risk discourse in mind when conceptualizing media literacy. They especially associate media literacy with raising awareness about media's potential detrimental effects. Teenagers' primary conceptualization of media literacy in terms of risks is rather surprising considering the policy's focus on active, creative and emancipatory media use. However, contextualizing these perceptions illuminate that both the public discourse and concrete media literacy initiatives largely draw from a protectionist perspective. This suggests that policy actors might be rather unsuccessful in translating their abstract empowerment approach into concrete guidelines for schools and teachers. Being exposed to mainly protectionist initiatives and discourses, this can explain why the teenagers in this study primarily associate the concept of media literacy to awareness of media risks.

Second, it was noticeable how the teenagers more often than not acknowledged negative stereotypes and moral panics directed at them. Although several participants expressed to be annoyed by adults' assumptions about teens' media use, most of them actively reproduced the image of the reckless and naïve digital native. Moreover, they projected this imagery on "others", mainly younger teenagers and children. The reproduction of this negative discourse seems to suggest that teenagers themselves contribute to their further disempowerment in society. However, appropriating a discourse that marginalizes the "broader" category of youth has been identified as a strategy young people employ to paradoxically overcome their structural marginalization in society (Christiansen et al., 2006). By rectifying the stereotypical portrayal of youths, these

participants implicitly and explicitly construct themselves as more cognizant and responsible than the "average teenager", meaning that restrictive initiatives should not be directed at them specifically.

Finally, our conversations with high-school students reveal that the school environment was considered as an appropriate space for "becoming media literate". The participants regarded teachers as semi-suitable socializing agents based on several characteristics. Although the teenagers alluded at age as an important factor for a teachers' capabilities to educate them on media literacy, it is important to note that the teachers' attitude towards media plays a pivotal role in this regard: Teachers who position themselves as "anti-media" and do not attempt to understand young people's life worlds are not taken seriously when it comes to advice on media use. Moreover, the participants draw from their risk discourse and focus on cognition when stating that they would give preference to "technical" socialization agents. The media expert that educates them about the dangers of new media and its working was mentioned throughout several interviews as an appropriate substitute for teachers.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution as it displays the perceptions and experiences of teenagers in Flanders, Belgium. Our in-depth exploration of how these teenagers are exposed to media literacy initiatives and dominant societal discourses could be specific to Flanders as these are socio-culturally constructed by assumptions on youth, media and education. Moreover, values and norms within the families of participants could also influence teenagers' perceptions of media literacy. Although family dynamics were naturally mentioned throughout the interviews, we are not able to take these fully into account based on the current sample. Therefore, we suggest media literacy scholars to explore this topic with teenagers from different regions across the globe and to extend these insights with contextual information from teens' family dynamics.

That being said, we propose three recommendations in order to further align teenagers' perceptions with contemporary emancipatory approaches on media literacy. First, although policies on media literacy have been increasingly inspired by emancipatory frameworks (e.g. Van Audenhove et al., 2018), a positive take on media literacy should be more explicitly highlighted. This does not mean that warnings about media risks and how to prevent them should be abandoned. Both the scholarly debate on media literacy and our conversations with high-school students indicate the importance of a healthy balance between protectionist and emancipatory approaches. However, our study shows that a risk discourse is still overemphasized which obscures the empowering potential of active and creative media use. We suggest that media literacy scholars and policies should investigate what the dominant discourses on media literacy in their societies are. This way, initiatives could also be directed at changing these dominant perceptions in order to achieve the aspired balance between a protectionist and emancipatory approach.

Second, we deem it equally important to map moral panics about teens' media use. During our interviews with teenagers, it became clear that they have tangible experiences of such stereotypical portrayals. Keeping media literacy initiatives in mind, these moral panics might have potential detrimental effects. For example, teachers who actively reproduce negative narratives of teenagers' media use are perceived as less capable to educate media literacy. Moreover, the importance of media literacy education can be underestimated for teenagers who distance themselves from that category by projecting moral panics on "others" (e.g. younger teenagers).

Finally, the results of our study signifies a rather functionalist and individualistic perspective towards media literacy among teenagers in which media literacy is perceived as an essential cognizance needed to function in contemporary mediated society. It is especially striking how these teens are convinced that media literacy should be educated by "adult" experts such as teachers and scholars who have knowledge about media. This conviction does not only obscure the potential of "informal learning" by engaging in media

practices together (e.g. Meyers, Erickson, & Small, 2013), it also forecloses the co- creation of media literacy

between teenagers and educators (e.g. McDougall & Potter, 2015). Such a view, we argue, impedes a broader

perspective that puts more emphasis on the everyday practices of young people, the meaning they assign to

these practices, and especially how they themselves can be considered media literacy experts.

Note

1. https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/media-literacy

2. "Media literacy is the whole of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow citizens to deal with the complex,

changing and mediatized world in a conscious and critical way. It is the ability to use media in an active and

creative way, aimed at societal participation." (Van Audenhove et al., 2018)

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