Media and Information Literacy: Conceptualization Within Knowledge Societies

(M)IL and Its Kind

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In our modern society people need knowledge to survive, to develop, to relax, to perform tasks, make decisions and solve problems. They need knowledge on themselves, their physical environment and their social environment. They can find this information in their information space via 3 processes: Observation, Conversation and Consultation.

Observation refers to the ability to look around and observe objects and processes, this is fact-finding by experimenting and authenticating. If I want to know if it's raining and I have to take an umbrella, I look out of the window and make a decision.

Conversation refers to the process in which we ask other people: family, friends, colleagues and experts for the information we need, face-to-face, by phone, by e-mail. Wondering if I have to take an umbrella, I can call my sister and ask her. She can look out of the window and decide. Perhaps she can even inform me better, because she has heard the weather forecast.

Consultation refers to the process in which we consult information professionals working in libraries, archives, museums, information institutes and information departments in organisations. Due to technology push and users demands long existing walls and traditions between them are disappearing and we call them 'memory institutions' now. In this case we are talking about stored or recoded information.

All three processes take place in the 'real' world where we can touch objects and the 'virtual' world, that we can only access with digital technology.

Each of us has a personal information space where we can find relevant information resources. It's created automatically when we are born and it develops and expands during our lifetime through our learning and working carrier, our social contacts and so on. When we grow very old the information space will shrink again.

However, there are barriers that impede or can even block successful access to the necessary information. Till now I distinguished four types of potential barriers that are based on interdependencies between people: economic, political, affective and cognitive. Today I add a fifth one – personal characteristics.

The economic barrier refers to the fact that people are dependent on the production and the distribution of scarce resources including food, clothing and housing. Since 1970s information is considered as the fourth production factor, which functions as the driving force of the economy. This means that supply and demand factors are applicable to the production, use and control of information and the technical and social infrastructure that is needed for access to information and its dissemination. Information costs money. As wealth is unevenly spread access to information is spread unevenly as well.

The political barrier refers to people's need to protect themselves against physical constraints and aggression of others. To obtain this protection a regulation of violence is needed whereby specialists can enforce power entitled to them through legislation. Hereby the law and order of a society is formally stipulated. These rules have reference to all relations people have with one another. For example, laws regarding information are the regulation of copyright, legislation on archives, access to government information and freedom for the press. These forms of legislation can be seen as political regulation through which access to information can be controlled.

The affective barrier refers to the fact that people have feelings for one another. People need one another for affection, love and support. Friendship and emotional relations are not limited only to other people, but also include objects and organisations that are appropriate to a person's culture. Therefore information sources and channels such as books, CDs, DVDs, television and Internet are also included. This liking has reference not only to the information media and channel, but also to the information type itself.

The cognitive barrier refers to the fact that people are dependent on one another because they learn from one another. People create knowledge and distribute it between themselves. Before the development of writing, verbal communication was prevalent. Writing and printing made it possible for information to be disseminated regardless of borders of time and space. Learning from one another happens in diverse ways and is not limited to education at school. The scope and content of what is taught to people depend on their social position and societal relations. An illiterate farm worker in the 18th century was not as affected by his or her illiteracy as an illiterate person in the first decade of the 21st century in Western society.

The personal characteristics barrier refers to the fact that people are of equal value, but are not all the same. They differ in gender, age, social environment and so on. And – which is relevant for this presentation – they can differ in abilities.

Those who are more capable to satisfy their information needs in an effective and efficient way, are more capable to survive and develop themselves than those with less advantageous traits. After Charles Darwin, "...it is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one **most responsive to change**…" Therefore today there is a strong need to be 'Information Literate'.

If we look at a long-term development over the ages we can see three developments in what I call the informatisation process: an ongoing control over natural forces (technization), an ongoing social and technical differentiation, an expanding of interdependency networks (globalisation). What effects do they have for people?

- Exponential growth of information, information media, information channels and information services.

- Growth of technology, tools and applications to retrieve, process and disseminate information.

- Changes in communication patterns and behaviour.

- Being 'Connected' 24/7.

What we see now is an ongoing working in the cloud. No longer do we carry our information with ourself, printed, on CD, DVD or a stick. The only thing we need is some device, from a cell phone to a tablet, electricity and a subscription of a provider. But that all needs money. And in how many 'clouds' are we working? Do we have separate ones for work and entertainment?

Increasing complexity of environment leads to a need for more skills to select, retrieve and process information.

The originator of the term "information literacy" was Paul Zurkowski. He first used it in 1974 in a proposal to the US National Commission on Libraries and Information Science "The Information Services Environment: Relationship and Priorities" (Related paper no. 5). At the time he coined the term he was President of the Information Industry Association. Zurkowski heads his prologue "The Goal: Achieving Information Literacy" and then goes on to state: "*We experience an overabundance of information whenever available information exceeds our capacity to evaluate it*". He claims that this is a universal condition and lists three reasons: 1) information seeking differs according to time and purpose; 2) there is a multiplicity of sources and access routs resulting in a kaleidoscopic approach taken by people; 3) more human experience is being dealt with in information equivalents. Talking about the commercial shape of publishing, Zurkowski uses the analogy of an information "prism" gathering "light" (ideas and concepts) and then performing a variety of "refracting" functions (editing, encoding, printing, microfilming, arranging, etc.) to produce a spectrum of products, services and

systems to meet the kaleidoscopic needs of the user. "People trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for utilizing the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in molding information solutions to their problems" (Zurkowski, 1974, p. 6). It is important to remember that Zurkowski is talking about the access and dissemination of information in the workplace as an economic benefit and necessity, calling on the National Commission to commit to a major national education programme to achieve universal information literacy by 1984.

In 1989 the American Library Association defined information literacy as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information in an ethical way".

The term got its further development in later documents. The 2003 Prague Declaration was called "Towards an Information Literate Society", thus a connection to the information society was made. The 2005 Alexandria Declaration "Beacons of the Information Society" linked information literacy to lifelong learning. At the moment we are working on UNESCO/IFLA Recommendations on Media and Information literacy. I have drafted the first version and it's now under revision.

We can describe an environment as information rich, when there is the possibility to access all kinds of information resources and channels and memory institutions. The opposite is information poor.

An information rich person is an information literate person able to use the variety of information in an efficient and effective way. He/she is able to learn life-long and to develop him/herself. An information poor person cannot do that.

This gives us theoretically four situations.

Information Rich – Information Poor
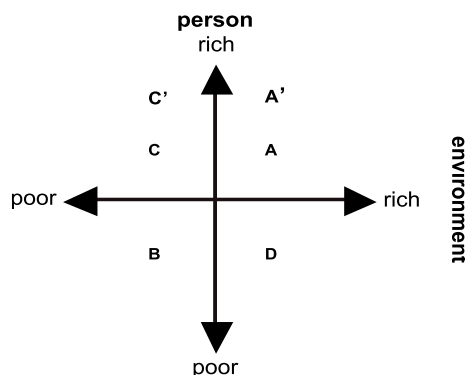
"A" – an information rich person in an information rich environment. In this situation a person is able to use the channels to satisfy his/her information needs.

"B" is the opposite: an information poor person in an information poor environment. This person is not even able to use the very few information resources that might be available.

"C" – an information rich person in an information poor environment. I can illustrate this situation by an example from my own experience. Last December I made a boat trip along the Amazon river. We visited some places where there was no access to whatever source, so that was a week without Internet. In such cases lack of resources does not let a person to apply his skills and competences.

"D" – an information poor person in an information rich environment. That person can learn to become information literate and use the possibilities adequately.

And what happens now? Our societies are developing. The complexity and possibilities expand. So the environment is becoming more 'rich'. Person C and person A are still 'information rich' because they learned how to develop themselves. And what about B and D? Unfortunately the gap between them and A and C has grown significantly.

Next to many definitions, there are many models. I developed one many years ago. It shows how a person comes from Knowledge moment K to K' and includes several aspects:

1. Recognition of an information need.
2. Translation of the information need into a query.
3. Identification of a suitable information source.
4. Application of knowledge of relevant ICT.
5. Selection, integration, dissemination of the information found.
6. Continuous evaluation.
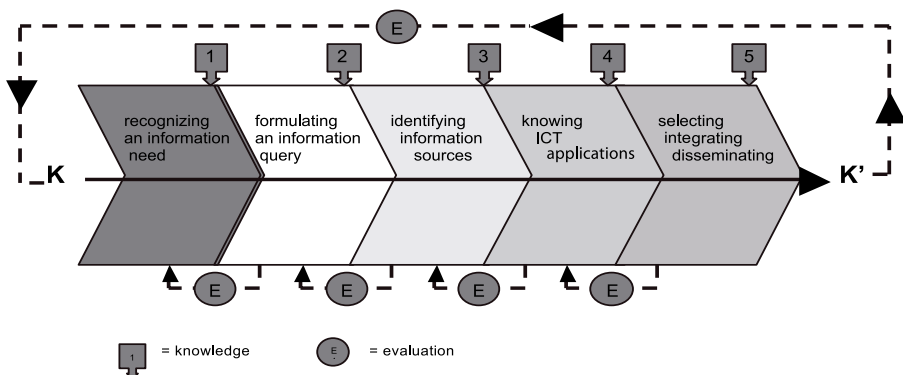
There is another model to be mentioned – the British SCONUL 7 pillars of information literacy, first published in 1999 and updated and expanded in 2011.

SCONUL Seven Pillars Model for Information Literacy
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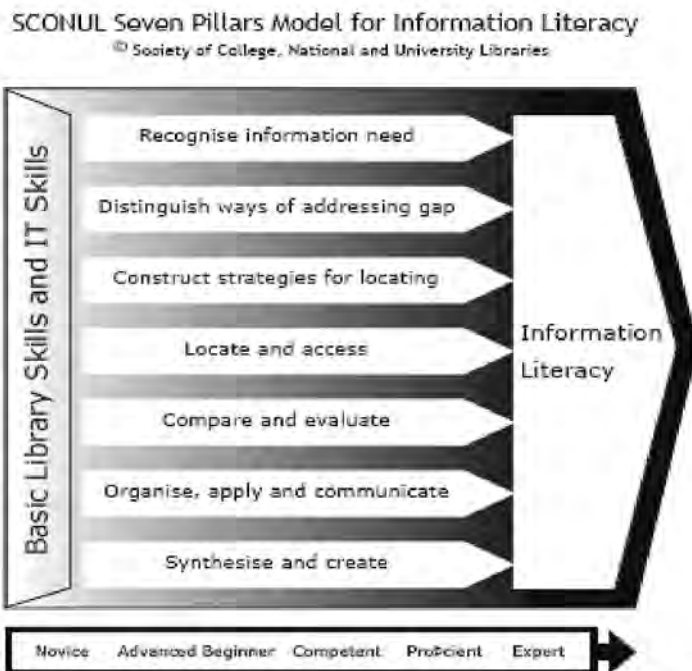
There are a lot of terms sometimes used synonymously with IL. For me IL so far was an umbrella concept and all other terms could be considered components of it.
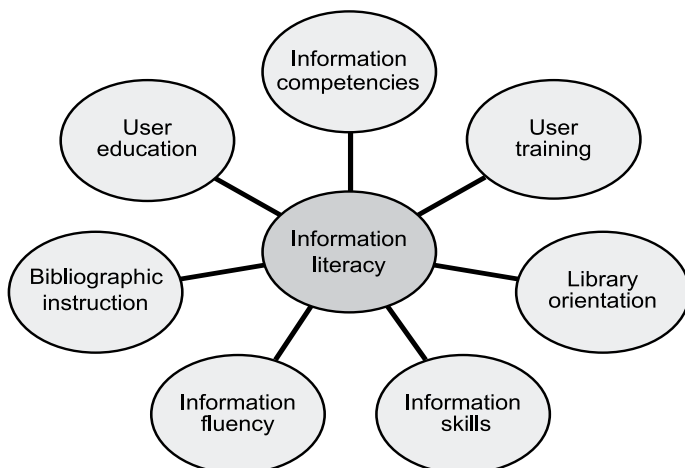
Information fluency – mastery of information competencies.

User education – global approach to teach information access to users.

Library instruction – focuses on library skills.

Bibliographic instruction – user training on information search and retrieval.

Information competencies – compound skills and goals of information literacy.

Information skills – focuses on information abilities.

Already in 1995 Harris and Hodges found 19 terms related to IL: Adult literacy; Advanced literacy; Basic literacy; Biliteracy; Community literacy; Computer literacy; Critical literacy; Cultural literacy; Emergent literacy; Family literacy; Functional literacy; Informational literacy; Marginal literacy; Media literacy; Minimal literacy; Restricted literacy Survival literacy Visual literacy Workplace literacy.

I think today I can find many more, including: Civic Literacy; News Literacy; Information Fluency; Health information Literacy; Emergent Literacy; Transliteracy; Copyright Literacy; Century Skills; 21st Century Information Fluency; Augmented Reality Literacy; Visual Literacy; Mobile Information Literacy.

Today IL is more and more often mentioned in the context of a new complex term – Media and Information Literacy. Several expert meetings were organised by UNESCO on various aspects of MIL, namely the one in Paris in June 2008, dedicated to the Teacher Training Curricula for Media and information Literacy, and the Bangkok meeting in November 2010 on Media and Information Literacy Indicators.

What is Media Literacy? According to Wikipedia, it is "a repertoire of competences that enable people to analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of media modes, genres, and forms".

Knowing what Information Literacy and Media Literacy mean, how can we define MIL?

We should remember that it is a **container** concept and a **dynamic** concept. Being '**MIL**' is a **competence**:

❑ a critical *Attitude* about:

- What am I doing?
- What for am I doing this?
- With what am I doing this?

❑ ***Knowledge*** about:
- the organization and quality of information resources and channels;
- acquiring access to information.

❑ ***Skills***: being able to use required skills and technology.

Today MIL is an integral part of Lifelong Learning.

MIL is a competence that is learned in the socialisation process:
- 'By doing'.
- Formal education.
- Informal education.

Especially the 'technical' part of the competence is learned by the younger generation in 'trial and error'. However becoming MIL cannot be learned in a distinct subject. Is has to be Integrated in any subject. This needs coordination between 'teachers' & 'librarians' at any educational level.

In each subject attention should be given to:
- **Information problems:** what are relevant problems in the subject?
- **Information questions:** how are questions in this subject formulated?
- **Resources:** what specific information resources are relevant for the subject?
- **Selection**: which of the identified sources are relevant?
- **Process**: what specific communication tradition are there regarding presentation, storing and dissemination?
- **ICT**: what specific skills are needed to use resources and applications ?
- **Evaluation**: Does each step indeed lead to obtain the desired information and satisfies the information need?

Aspects of MIL should be given in such a way that they reflect the needs of the person at that time, taking in account gender, age and context. This asks for an 'ongoing learning line' and 'Learning moments' that comprises the whole education period and goes on in Life Long Learning.

Although there is a widespread consensus on what MIL should be, there are still much variation in practice and orientation. But if we look at global trends we can see that IL was originated in 'industry', and later on went into (school) libraries. The differentiation of concept lead to a confusing variety of terms. IL is still there, more and more ´integrated´, but we witness a lack of interest of 'management' and reluctance of 'teachers'. These problems need to be solved.