



## **Guidelines for ethics in media literacy research**

### **Introduction**

Media Literacy Network members in their initiatives and activities for promotion of media literacy in the country often rely on data received from the research of different aspects of this phenomenon: provided information and opinions of individuals on media contents, skills and capabilities of particular age groups of the population to critically perceive contents, behaviour and practices of the population with regards to online contents, etc.

The purpose of these *Guidelines* is to promote ethical conduct towards all individuals and groups included in the research, and also to encourage good research practice and increase quality of planning, implementation and publication of media literacy research.

With the adoption of the *Guidelines*, Media Literacy Network members agree to comply with the fundamental ethical principles and guidelines in the implementation of media literacy research. This document became mandatory for organizations – Network members and for individual researchers who work for them.

The research ethics implies a sum of values, principles and rules of conduct some research unit adheres to in the process of implementation of research practice, regardless of whether it is part of the scientific or applied social research. The guidelines for research ethics in any particular area codify the fundamental values and principles of the research unit working in that area; however, they rely on general scientific-research ethics in the social sciences.

Although the term research ethics refers mainly to issues related to the manner of researcher's conduct towards the subjects included in the research, it also encompasses other activities related to qualitative implementation of the research: research planning, organization and implementation of research process, result dissemination, etc.

## **I. Fundamental principles and standards in the research**

### **1 Research integrity**

Researchers and research organizations in the area of media literacy will comply with the generally accepted principles and standards in the scientific-research activity.

The basic obligation of every researcher is to seek the truth, new knowledge and thorough understanding of the social occurrences. In that process, the researcher relies on relevant theoretical knowledge and empirical results achieved in the researched area and the generally accepted standards and principles in the methodology of implementing scientific-research work.

The integrity of research activity is developed and maintained only by means of compliance with the principles and standards determined in the methodology of scientific-research work. The non-compliance with these principles and standards seriously brings into question the collective integrity of the research activity since it implies fraud, concealment and twisting of the truth. The most serious examples of non-compliance are fabrication and forgery of data and plagiarism. The principles of research integrity apply to all kinds of research and in every phase of the research process.

### **2 Research freedom**

Researchers and research organizations in the area of media literacy are responsible for the freedom of the research work and the integrity and independence of the research from any influence.

The established general principles of relevance, originality, transparency and credibility of the research can be brought into question if other interests are considered as a priority in the research process. Hence, the obligation of the researchers and research organizations is to prevent any internal or external effects which may limit in any way the research of the defined issue.

The obligation for research transparency implies that when publishing research results and conclusions, they must not be concealed, distorted or selectively processed. Any attempt to imply or direct the research results towards certain matter is unacceptable. Freedom of research is freedom to request, create and spread knowledge in the public sphere.

The freedom of research can be brought into question especially when the research is ordered or paid by someone else. For that purpose, the research organizations are obliged to introduce procedures which will protect the integrity and independence of the research process.

### **3 Research responsibility**

The public trust in relation with the research is gained through responsibility of the researchers and research organizations.

The researchers and research organizations bear responsibility with regards to the published research, since social decisions are being made based on such research, as well as actions and spreading of new knowledge, opinions and views in the public sphere. Hence, the researchers are also responsible and obliged to publish the source of the issue, subject of the research, the methods of collection and analysis of data and quality of collected data that support the research findings.

The research is quite important for the society; however, sometimes it can lead to unwanted and harmful consequences. The responsible conducting of the research implies that assessment should be made of the occurrence of any possible unintentional and unwanted consequences. The researchers must make sure that the research process is not contrary to any legal provisions, does not put at risk any particular individuals or make any other damage in the community.

#### **4 Responsibility of research organizations**

Research organizations should guarantee the quality of their research and promote ethical principles and standards in the media literacy research.

The organizations conducting media literacy research should support development and maintenance of standards and quality of research. They should promote the *Guidelines* for ethics in the research among their employees, institutions they cooperate with, partner organizations, donors and other relevant factors.

The organizations should select relevant experts within the research teams conducting the research and the appropriate training of younger researchers. They should also establish clear procedures for action in situations when there is doubt or allegations for acting contrary to the Guidelines and the good research practice.

## **II. Respecting the rights of individuals in the course of the research**

#### **5 Respecting the human dignity**

Research organizations and researchers are obliged and responsible to respect human rights and dignity.

In the course of conducting media literacy research, serious and responsible approach must be used in terms of human rights and respect of human dignity. This means that the researchers, while performing their research work, should respect the personal integrity, individual freedom, right to personal opinion, privacy and family status of the participants in the research, and such rights must not be neglected or subordinated while reaching the research goal.

The organizations and researchers must be well aware of the rights of individuals included in the research and show high level of professionalism and ethical approach in the communication with them. Any forms of discrimination of the subjects based on their personal characteristics or determinations, forbidden free expression, as well as false presentation of their opinions in the research work are deemed as violations of the research ethics which bring into question the research integrity.

## **6 Personal data privacy protection**

The proper use of personal data or other information on the private life of the participants in the research is basic obligation of the researchers and research organizations.

Organizations and researchers conducting media literacy research are obliged to protect the privacy and private life of participants during the research, i.e. protect their personal integrity. For such purpose, they are obliged to provide conditions and measures for protection of the privacy of subjects and security of personal data they have access to in the course of conducting the research.

The protection of privacy in the course of the research is especially important when the person included in the research:

- has limited effect on the decision whether he/she will participate in the research;
- is not fully able to protect his/her own needs and interests;
- contributes to the collection of data just by being active and agreeing, for example, to be interviewed or monitored;
- can be identified, directly or indirectly, in the publications or other published materials as an individual or member of distinguishable community.

Clear distinction should be made between the personal data and private information that must not be disclosed to the public and the contents for which legal basis exists to be published in the research report or other publications intended for the public. Personal data can be disclosed only with previously obtained consent from the participant in the research.

## **7 Limited use of personal data**

Data which may identify participants in particular research cannot automatically be used in other research.

The reuse of personal data collected for the needs of particular research, by default, implies sending request for consent once again to the participants in the research. This does not refer to aggregated personal data, collected for statistical calculations, which cannot reveal the identity of the individual.

However, aggregated data should not be mixed with anonymous data, where personal data are removed so that unauthorized person cannot make any connection of the data

with the identity of participants. The reuse of anonymous data implies seeking consent from participants in situations when researchers combine such data with the data received via active contact with the participants and when there is a possibility the individual's identity to be indirectly located. If the researcher fails to obtain consent for reuse of personal data, the researcher is obliged to explain why the research is more important than the compliance with this rule.

The exception of the rule for limited use of personal data refers to anonymous data or when the researcher cannot connect the subject with the data.

## **8 Confidentiality and personal data storage**

The research organization and the researcher are obliged to ensure confidentiality, protection and anonymity of the personal data of the participant in the research. Personal data will be kept in a safe place and only for the needs of the research project.

Any participant in the research has the right to protection of his/her personal data and, if the participant does not agree such data to be publicly used, the right to confidentiality and data protection. The data collected by research organizations and researchers in the course of conducting research are kept in secrecy and not disclosed if the subject does not give consent for publishing thereof.

Particular information on the participant in the research may be published only if that is necessary for the purpose, results and conclusions of the research, in accordance with the legal provisions for using personal data with guaranteed anonymity of the individual.

If the participant does not provide consent for use of his/her personal data in the course of the research, the organization and the researcher are obliged to keep such data as confidential and take measures for safekeeping thereof.

The subject who provides consent for use of his/her personal data has the right to know which data, for what purpose and how long they will be kept. The organization or the researcher is obliged to keep personal data as long as necessary for meeting the goals of the research project.

## **9 Obligation for sharing information and obtaining consent**

Research organizations and researchers are obliged to fully inform the participants on important aspects of the research and seek consent for participation and use of personal data.

The participant in the research should be informed on the topic and purpose of the research, the orderer i.e. the source funding the research, the manner in which the participant is selected in the project and how the research results will be used.

The participant in the research should be fully aware of the type of personal or sensitive data being collected and the method and purpose for which such data will be used should be thoroughly explained. The information sharing must be neutral, without pressuring the participant, adapted to his/her needs and culture and in a language the participant understands.

The researcher is obliged to obtain explicit consent for participation in the research which, depending on the method of data collection, may be in verbal or written form. When using particular methods (detailed interviews, focus groups), the consent form signed by the participant in the research should contain questions related to the consent for recording, as well as confidentiality and use of personal data.

If the participant refuses his/her personal data to be used, the research organization and/or researcher are obliged to respect the right to privacy of the subject. The consent of the subject must be freely given, without any pressure and force by the researcher or other persons not included in the research project.

### **10 Protection of children**

Research organizations and researchers are obliged to respect the rights of minors in the research, to be aware of their age and needs and adjust the research procedure accordingly.

The research including children and adolescents should be conducted with special care, since they are still developing and have different needs, interests and capabilities than the adults. The researchers should be informed on the age of minors and should adjust the procedure for research according to their age.

The formal consent for participation of minor in the research should be given by the parent or tutor. However, minors should be also properly informed on the research project, so that they can understand it by themselves and voluntarily participate in the project to the extent to which that is possible. In the course of the research, minors should be treated as independent individuals and should be allowed to freely express their opinion or views.

Special attention should be given to the collection of personal data on minors. For the purpose of collection and use thereof formal written consent from a parent or tutor is necessary, whereby they should be informed in detail on the purpose for which such data are being collected and how such data will be kept and used.

## **III. Rights of groups and institutions in the research**

### **11 Respecting vulnerable groups**

Researchers are responsible to respect rights and interests of vulnerable groups in all phases of the research process.

Individuals belonging to vulnerable group are not always able to protect their rights and interests in the process of communication with the researchers. Also, they may not want to participate in the research due to the fear of expressing their opinions or emotions in front of other people.

On the other hand, the research of their opinions, views, experiences and reactions with regards to potentially harmful media contents is of great importance for the development of programmes and particular activities for their protection from such contents and policy making which leads to media contents which respect their needs and interests.

Therefore, the researchers collecting information on media literacy for vulnerable groups are obliged to adjust the procedure for sharing information and obtaining consent for participation in the research. They also should be careful not to use different classifications, descriptions and terms which stereotype or stigmatize the people belonging to these groups.

## **12 Respecting cultural differences**

Researchers should establish relations of trust and respect with the representatives of different cultural groups participating in the research.

In the course of researching people belonging to different cultures in the Macedonian society, the researchers should be sensitive when it comes to their specific cultural tradition, language, customs and opinions. This implies careful approach to such issues while planning and conducting the research.

When collecting data and in the research reports, the researchers should be especially careful not to use classifications, descriptions and terms which stereotype or stigmatize the people belonging to different cultural groups.

The researchers should also take care of the balance when it comes to respect of different cultures and recognition and respect of fundamental human rights and values. The respect and loyalty towards particular culture does not mean that the researcher will justify or accept the discrimination and violation of human rights, motivated by someone's belonging to vulnerable or marginalized group.

## **13 Public institutions in the research**

The public institutions should be transparent and open for media literacy research.

The citizens and the public have legitimate interest to know how the public institutions work, especially the ones competent for media literacy development. This means that the researchers should be given maximum possible access to documents and data at the disposal of the public institutions.

The researchers' access can be limited only based on exceptions foreseen with the Law on Free Access to Public Information (personal data protection, keeping safety, etc.).

#### **IV. Rules on research publication**

##### **14 Plagiarism**

According to the general principles of ethical work of the researchers and research organizations, plagiarism is unacceptable and seriously destroys the reputation and credibility of the research.

Plagiarism in the research profession means representation of another researcher's/author's work as one's own original work, without specifying the source. Plagiarism is unacceptable and is deemed as serious violation of research ethics and principles of good and qualitative research. That destroys the reputation of the researcher, the research organization and the credibility of the research in general. Plagiarism is violation of the principles for honesty, originality, independence and integrity of the research work.

The most obvious form of plagiarism is copying or rewriting; however, it has other forms as well, such as: using one's ideas, hypotheses, concepts, theories, interpretations, results as their own. The explicit quoting, using references or footnotes or pointing out when the text is being paraphrased are some of ways to avoid plagiarism.

##### **15 Practice of using quotations**

Researchers are obliged to quote and provide detailed and particular references about the sources used in the course of drafting the research project.

The researchers are obliged to specify all sources of information used in the course of drafting the research project. This is a prerequisite the research to be subjected to criticism, thus gain importance and open opportunity for further research.

The references and quotations must be correct, regardless of whether they are primary or secondary literature. If the researcher uses public documents or other sources of information from the Internet, the researcher is obliged to give the correct reference which can be used to find the particular information source. Particular paragraph or page where the quotation or reference can be found is usually mentioned in the references.

## **16 Transparency of methods and data**

Sharing materials and methods of data collection and analysis strengthens the transparency and ensures open debate on the value of the results from the research.

The researchers should always be transparent with regards to the methodology applied in the implementation of the research project, including the design of the sample, methods and the total procedure for data collection and analysis. That is the basic prerequisite for development of the knowledge, comparison and critical assessment of the published data and results.

Sharing the database from conducted primary quantitative research is of exceptional importance for other researchers who want to use them as secondary data in other analyses and research. In the course of database sharing the rule for privacy protection should be adhered to, i.e. the data from which participants in the primary research can be identified should be made anonymous.

## **17 Presentation of results from the research**

Research organizations and researchers are responsible to present the results from the research to the public in objective, correct, impartial and understandable manner.

The organizations and researchers will not present the results from the research in a way in which the public will get the wrong perception of the researched occurrence. The results from the research should be presented objectively, properly and precisely in order to avoid any distorted or tendentious interpretation.

The research organizations are obliged to ensure that the orderer of the research or any other subject will not affect the results from the research or the way of their presentation. If the results are used in a selective or tendentious manner, the researchers are obliged to specify that.

Organizations and researchers are obliged to inform the participants in the research of the results in a manner adjusted to their needs and interests.