



## Head Start – Media Literacy in Hungarian Education Policy (1990-1995)

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*Annamaria Neag*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

With an ever stronger influence over culture, politics and society at large, (social) media has made its way into classrooms in many countries across the globe through media literacy education. At the core of media literacy stands the need to educate students in a century of media culture. Media literacy education has a fairly long history in Hungary, compared to other neighbouring countries. Its roots can be found in the aesthetics classes of the 1960s, but as a subject, media literacy was introduced in 1996. Hungary is in the fortunate position thus of having an optional subject to explore the role of mass-media in society for over 20 years now. This article aims to investigate the very first steps of media literacy education in terms of educational policy-making. For doing so, the article builds upon interpretive policy analysis and expert interviews and sheds light over how a very modern field of study appeared in Hungarian public education.

**Keywords:** media literacy, educational policy, foreign countries, public education, qualitative policy analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Annamaria Neag is a teaching fellow at the School of International Communications, University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China. Email address: [annamaria.neag@nottingham.edu.cn](mailto:annamaria.neag@nottingham.edu.cn)

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Every three years, when the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results are out, the world marvels at Finland. Why is the Finnish educational system so successful? While this question in itself would be enough to write a handful of PhD dissertations, for our purposes only one aspect will be highlighted. Finnish schools work with a changing reading environment and an “enlarged concept of text in schools and in libraries” (Sinko, 2012). The concept of “text” today thus incorporates media texts and audio-visual texts too. Finland apparently recognized the importance of these changes. Moreover, children’s socialization is tightly interwoven with (social) media, and this has been the case for at least the last 20 years. Scholars interested in this development have stressed the importance of media literacy education. Media literacy, or the skill to understand media, appeared as a concept in a 1962 BBC Handbook (Wallis, 2014). Today, the 1992 media literacy definition adopted by the Aspen Leadership Institute (the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms), has been expanded to include further aspects. Among these, the most important aspects are those considering media literacy as a means for civic participation, self-expression and skills of inquiry (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.).

In Hungary, media literacy education stems from the film aesthetics classes introduced in the 1960s. The field of media literacy has also been influenced by those passionate teachers whom before the political change of 1989/1990 organized film clubs and were active in alternative education. The subject called *Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education* was introduced in 1996 in the very first national core curriculum that was adopted after the regime change. The national core curriculum emerged in a tumultuous period of political and social changes. Before presenting and analysing the media literacy content, I will describe the political situation, which greatly influenced the first national core curriculum of the newly democratic Hungary.

### Politics and educational policy-making

When examined in detail, throughout the last 30 years changes in political life in Hungary were followed closely by changes in educational policy-making (Bathory, 2001). For instance in the 1980s, the loosening of the regime’s grip became visible in public education as well. The three main notions influencing public education during that period were autonomy, decentralisation and alternative teaching (Bathory, 2001). More and more teachers were experimenting with alternative pedagogies. During this period, film-passionate teachers started organizing extra-curricular movie screenings and film-making workshops.

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<sup>2</sup> This article is based on one of the chapters of the author’s PhD dissertation. However, the article presents a number of changes and adaptations that the initial chapter did not include.

With the political turn in 1989, in line with the three main political camps of the early 1990s, three distinct view of educational policy came to the fore: the conservative, the liberal, and the socialist-social democrat (Bathory, 2001, p. 93). While at the very beginning there was a strong sense of cooperation in the field of education, this cooperation disappeared and the main political camps had polarized views on how the Hungarian educational system should progress. These conflicts resulted in a total of six national core curricula between 1989 and 1995.

The first NCC was presented to professional circles in May 1990. This new document was intended to break with centralisation and was aimed at introducing a new concept: the minimum curriculum. The minimum curriculum was proposed as a foundation for the development of school-based curricula. The new document was heavily criticised. As a result a new NCC was drafted by the spring of 1991. However, the second version was not accepted either. Thus a third NCC was presented at the beginning of 1992. This NCC introduced the concept of development areas and the requirements were determined according to specific school periods. A strong conflict was on the way between those arguing for modernisation and those who wanted to continue a more conservative line in education. As a consequence, a fourth national core curriculum was developed. This new NCC introduced a three level regulation: the core curriculum, the framework curriculum and the local school curriculum. This one was not accepted either, and NCC number five was on its way when in 1994 a new government was installed. The leftist Hungarian Socialist Party – Alliance of Free Democrats government asked for a sixth version of the national core curriculum. This version was finally accepted and its implementation started in 1996. NCC 6 did not last long though: with the Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) victory of 1998, the Law on Public Education was amended. The two-level regulation (NCC and school curricula) was discarded, and framework curricula were again reintroduced. Gabor Halasz (2001) considers the NCC implementation the most important event in public education. According to him, the biggest contradiction was to be found between the very modern curriculum approach of the NCC and the existing school mechanisms (Halasz, 2001). As Torok (2015) observes, a sort of management naivety led policy-makers and politicians alike, in believing that the Anglo-Saxon education model can be transplanted into the Hungarian public education without major problems.

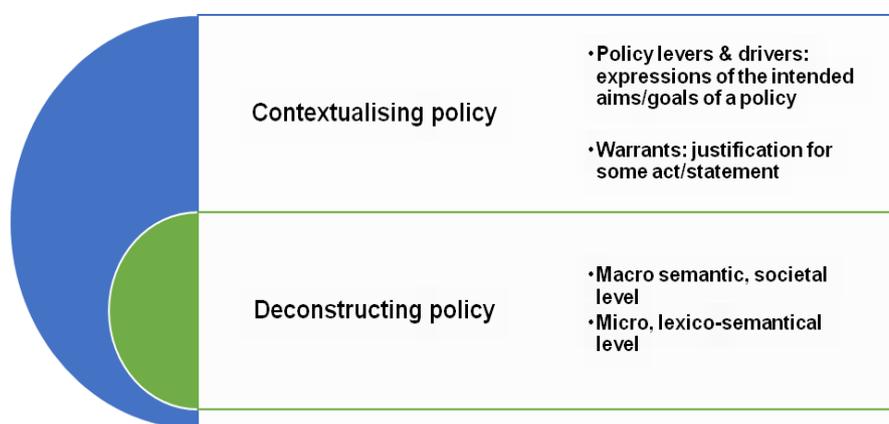
In this short and condensed history of the Hungarian educational landscape of the 1990s, it becomes clear that public education was turned into a political battlefield. The story of Hungarian NCC could be a great example for to what Ball and Bowe (1992) are referring to when discussing whether a national core curriculum can reflect an unambiguous position of the government:

*[...] Policy texts are not closed, their meanings are neither fixed nor clear, and the carryover of meanings from one policy arena and one educational site to another is subject to interpretational slippage and contestation. (p. 98)*

## Methodological considerations

For understanding how media literacy appeared in the 1995 NCC, this paper will use an interpretivist paradigm (Cohen & Carbtree, 2006). The traditional view presented policy-making as a “deliberate process, undertaken by a known and bounded set of actors, who use research and reason to ensure the best policy outcomes” (Deim et al., 2014, p.1069). However, in the last three decades a growing number of policy researchers started using a new approach: they started focusing on critical and deconstructivist frameworks. Building on Norman Fairclough’s approach, this paper will focus on the different discourses on media literacy that appear in education policies. In doing so, David Hyatt’s (2013) analytical framework was used (see **Figure 1**). This framework comprises two elements: contextualizing and deconstructing policy.

Figure 1: A model representation of Hyatt’s analytical framework for critical educational policy analysis



Firstly, the educational policy-making has to be placed within a broader economic, social and historical context. Contextualization is composed of two elements: policy levers and drivers - these refer “to expressions of the intended aims or goals of a policy” (Hyatt, 2013, p. 838) - and warrants, or “the justification, authority or «reasonable grounds» established for some act, course of action, statement or belief” (Cochran-Smith and Fries, 2001, p. 4) Hyatt argues that levers aid policy-steering, being instruments “the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change in public services... functional mechanisms through which government and its agencies seek to implement policies” (Steer et al., 2007, p. 177). In educational settings, these levers can be target-setting, funding, inspection etc. (Hyatt, 2013). On the other hand, warrants provide justification for policies. Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) talk about three types of warrants: evidentiary warrants, accountability warrants and political warrants. The evidentiary warrant is based on the commonly accepted view that if a justification is based on evidence, it is undisputable. The accountability warrant emphasizes results and outcomes. In policy-making, this type of warrants focus on what the results will be, if a specific policy will be adopted (e.g. initiatives that aim to improve standards). Political warrants “refer to the way in which a policy is justified in terms of the public/national interest, the public good” (Hyatt, 2013, p. 839).

The second component of the analytical framework is policy-deconstruction, which is carried out by applying critical discourse analysis and critical literacy analysis. The analysis will present both the macro semantic level and the micro semantic level (vocabulary, use of stylistic devices, and grammar).

### **Contextualising media literacy policy**

The 1995 curriculum was special because of the two-level regulation model that was introduced in contrast with the centralised model known during communism. The new model had two building blocks: 1.) the NCC that defined basic requirements in ten subject areas and 2.) the detailed local curricula, which was a school-level document.

Media literacy, as such, is not mentioned in the NCC. This is not at least surprising since the term “mediatudatosság” (media literacy) or “mediamuveltseg” (media culture) has only just recently gained recognition in Hungary. In the 1995-NCC the term used is “mediaismeret” (media knowledge or media education). Media education appears for the first time in the chapter on the NCC’s ten subject areas, and within that in the Arts subject area.

Although media literacy as a term does not appear in the NCC, we can spot a very important policy lever in connection with it in the common requirements. All subject areas have a number of common cross-curricular requirements. These requirements have to appear in all levels of public education, according to the NCC. There are seven common requirements: 1) Homeland studies (Hon- es nepismeret), 2) Connections to Europe and the Wider World (Kapcsolodás Európához és a nagyvilághoz), 3) Environmental Education (Környezeti nevelés), 4) Culture of Communication (Kommunikációs kultúra), 5) Physical and Mental Health (Testi és lelki egészség), 6) Learning to Learn (Tanulás), and 7) Career Orientation (Pályáorientáció). Among these, the specific lever in connection with what we call now media literacy appears in Culture of Communication:

*Today, the vast majority of information is not addressed to us personally, but through intermediary artificial systems. The massive, passive consumption of information could lead to a distortion of living and thinking. Therefore, the schools must educate the youth to understand and be selective about the new audio-visual environment. (NCC, 1995)*

This text signifies a very important milestone in the history of media education in Hungary: only few years after the 1989 events, and the curriculum experts already highlighted that one of the goals of the national core curriculum should be to have media literate pupils.

For understanding this goal thoroughly, it is important to see what levers were at that time accessible to the Hungarian government. The levers accessible for the government were the minimal requirements as stipulated in the NCC. The NCC defines broad subject areas, instead of traditional academic subjects and it only presents the proposed

distribution of teaching time between them. However, the framework curricula and the local programs had to follow the NCC indications.

As another important element of contextualization, warrants provide justification for policies. For the first new NCC, the political warrant stands out. The NCC became the battlefield for fierce political clashes between the different governments and parties. The long and divisive debates surrounding the NCC introduction led to widespread uncertainty in the sphere of public education. However, when there was no further possibility to delay the introduction of the NCC, the ruling political actors were forced to make a decision, and face the lasting opposition of political adversaries (Torok, 2015). It is no wonder then that the final, 1995 NCC was being thus justified in terms of education for a “good society”:

*The NCC requirements are defined by values formulated in the Constitution, the preamble of the Act on Public Education, in certain international conventions on fundamental human rights, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, and [values of] public education, children's rights, and rights of national and ethnic minorities. These values are complemented by the European development of civic values, scientific-technical progress, and the domestic cultural values and pedagogical traditions. (NCC, 1995)*

### **Deconstructing media literacy policy - the macro semantic level**

When it comes to policy analysis it is crucial to shed light on how governments justify their actions. Policies are frequently justified by attaching them to dominant norms (Hyatt, 2013). According to Fairclough (2003) there are four modes to accomplish legitimation discursively: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and mythopoesis (legitimation through narratives). The legitimation of the NCC is positioned in the introductory part of the document. In analysing this fragment, it is telling that the authors of the NCC combine two modes of legitimation: authorization and moral evaluation. The very first sentence is: “The NCC is the fundamental document of Hungarian public education as it was laid down in the –successively modified- 1993 Act no. LXXIX” (NCC, 1995). The authors reference here another law as justification. When it comes to moral evaluation the authors of the NCC make reference to such values as fundamental human rights, freedom of conscience and religion, etc. The discourses found in the first NCC after the regime change are linked to discourses about the importance of democracy: “The NCC requirements are permeated by the values of democracy” (NCC, 1995). The value system that is presented in the NCC includes references to national values, European values and the future common problems facing humanity. With only six years after the political turn, this sequence is not surprising: policy-makers focus on the new values important to the political system.

Another element important in analysing texts from a macro, societal level is evaluation. According to Hunston and Thompson, evaluation is the “the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (2000, p. 5). Further on evaluation can be

inscribed or evoked (Martin & Wodak, 2003). Inscribed evaluation presents the unconcealed opinion of the authors, while evoked evaluation uses neutral choices. In case of the NCC, one can find both inscribed and evoked evaluation. One example of inscribed evaluation comes up when the authors highlight that the new NCC is a “unitary foundation” (NCC, 1995) for preparing framework curricula, pedagogical programs and local curricula through its “modern combination of basic educational content and competencies to be developed” (NCC, 1995). Evaluation in this case is overtly constructed. Meanwhile there are a number of phrases which fit into the evoked category: “[the NCC] gives an opportunity for the enforcement of school operators’, parents’, and pupils’ values and interests, for the enforcement of pedagogues’ professional pursuits, as well as for taking into consideration the existing situation, conditions and opportunities” (NCC, 1995). The message here is clear: the new NCC takes into consideration the needs and interests of those directly impacted by its adoption. The ideological value behind this phrase is then that the NCC is a unitary document that supports differentiation. In terms of evaluation thus, what comes across from this introductory part of the NCC is that the new curriculum is indeed new because it “breaks away” (NCC, 1995) from older regulations, it is “modern”, it takes into consideration the schools’ and pupils’ existing conditions and it has as a main task to serve personal development.

A further aspect of analysis is the use of presuppositions or implications. In the case of the NCC, one of the most interesting presuppositions is that schools and teachers *would like* differentiation. The following fragment is revealing:

*Content regulation is built on the diversified activities of schools, teachers and students and on an unified common basis. It gives an opportunity to school owners, parents and pupils to validate their values, interests and professional aspirations, and to take into account the existing circumstances, conditions and opportunities. (NCC, 1995)*

The presupposition of the authors is that school owners, teachers and parents *want* to have their interests, values and aspirations to be taken into account by a core curriculum that offers a basis on which to build local curricula. The NCC was offering thus this opportunity for them. This is once again, a proof of the Anglo-Saxon influence mentioned earlier. Educational experts agree now that this presupposition was only wishful thinking (Utone, 2004). „The schools and the teachers were not prepared for such freedom. They were accustomed to have everything clearly stipulated, with centralised teaching requirements. This is why, probably, this NCC was met with strong resistance and was later taken into a more centralised direction.” – as Jakab explained (Gy. Jakab, personal communication, November 4, 2015).

### **Deconstructing media literacy policy - the micro semantic level**

As previously mentioned, the term media literacy does not appear as such in the NCC. Therefore, this analysis took into account all relevant textual content that referred to what today we would call media literacy education. References to media literacy can be

found in the common cross-curricular requirements, referred to as *Communication Culture*. Media literacy education appears also in specific subjects: in *Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education* and partly in *Information Technology*. In the microanalysis I will first focus on the cross-curricular requirements, and then I will examine media literacy elements in the main subject.

Media literacy first appears in the cross-curricular requirements. Out of the seven cross-curricular requirements, *Communication Culture* occupies the fourth place, preceded by *Homeland studies*, *Connections to Europe and the Wider World*, and *Environmental Education*. *Communication Culture* is the “understanding, selection, analysis, evaluation, use, transmission and creation of information that serves cognition, learning, knowledge, human relationships, collaboration and social interaction” (NCC, 1995). The definition uses general terms and offers broad applications of the major element here, and namely ‘information’. When observed closely, all other requirements are also phrased in loose terms. Since these cross-curricular requirements have to appear in some form in all subjects, the authors use enumerations in order to offer over-arching examples and explanations that can aid the introduction of these elements in everyday teaching. For our purposes the last three phrases are of particular interest:

*Today, the vast majority of information is not gathered through “messages” addressed to us personally, but through intermediary artificial systems. The massive, passive consumption of information can lead to a distortion of living and thinking. Therefore, the schools must educate youth to understand and be selective about the new audio-visual environment. (NCC, 1995)*

The second phrase has a darker tone: high mass-media usage can lead to a “distortion” of people’s lifestyles and thinking. There is no additional explanation of what “massive” usage or “distortion” actually is. “Distortion” is emphatically used here, aimed to strengthen the intention of the authors. The last sentence offers education as the solution, as shown by the adverb (“therefore”). Throughout the last 20 years of media literacy education, cinematic arts were the focus point. The same point can be made when closely analysing this last phrase. Although the second phrase talks about “information consumption” in general, this consumption refers only to the “audio-visual environment”.

Going further, the analysis of modality shows an interesting process: the selected fragment starts with the indicative mood and then with the use of the modal verbs (“can lead to” and “must educate”) it turns to the subjunctive mood. The indicative mood allows the authors to express strong affirmations, while the subjunctive mood allows expression of hypotheses (in this case, the possible distortion of living) and commands (of schools to educate youth).

While in this text there is no mention of the term *media literacy*, these three phrases reflect quite well the early understanding of media literacy: a strong emphasis on protection from harmful media effects. In this text, it is also important to highlight the

fact that the responsibility of educating media literate children rests solely on the schools.

The *Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education* subject is part of the Arts subject area, together with *Literature, Music, Dance and Drama, and Visual Culture*. In the Arts subject area the *Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education* subject is presented in the following way:

*A substantial proportion of information and experience received by children is acquired through images and visual impressions. Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education prepares pupils for the reception, expedient utilization and ordering of a wide variety of visual experience. (NCC, 1995)*

This definition shows the very strong moving image focus of early media education activists. It is interesting to note that although the subject preceding this definition is called *Visual Culture*, there is no connection made between the two. Yet when examined carefully there is an overwhelming reference to visuality: “images”, “visual impressions”, “visual experience”. There is no word on any other topic that might be important in terms of media education such as print or radio media, for instance. This is quite striking since the second part of the subject’s title is “media education”.

The aims of the subject are presented through an enumeration of verbs: “to receive”, “to use” and “to arrange” visual experiences. The verbs show an interest of the authors to have children to engage with this type of media. Media production is actually one of the major scopes of media literacy education. However it is intriguing to see the adjective here: “expedient utilization”. In discourse analysis, adjectives are particularly important because they express “[...] speakers’ and writers’ perceptions, evaluations, and judgements about people, things, experiences and events” (Strauss, Feiz, 2014, p. 29). This specific adjective implies that there is a utilization that is appropriate, in comparison with other utilizations that are - by comparison - not. This type of phrasing can be connected and understood in light of the child protection discourse which appeared in the cross-curricular requirements too.

The detailed requirements of the subject are divided into requirements expected by the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Visually the requirements appear in clearly structured tables that have three main units: *Teaching materials, Developmental requirements, and Minimal achievements*. Those familiar with curricula studies, can notice that these requirements are an interesting combination of input and output-type of education model. According to Gyorgy Jakab, this combination is the result of long debates between those advocating for a more traditional approach to education (focus on input) and the “reformists” (focus on output). The critical discourse analysis combined with information gathered through the interviews strengthens once more Ball and Bowe’s (2006, p.113) comment: “[...] as policy, the National Curriculum remains both the object and subject of struggles over meaning.”

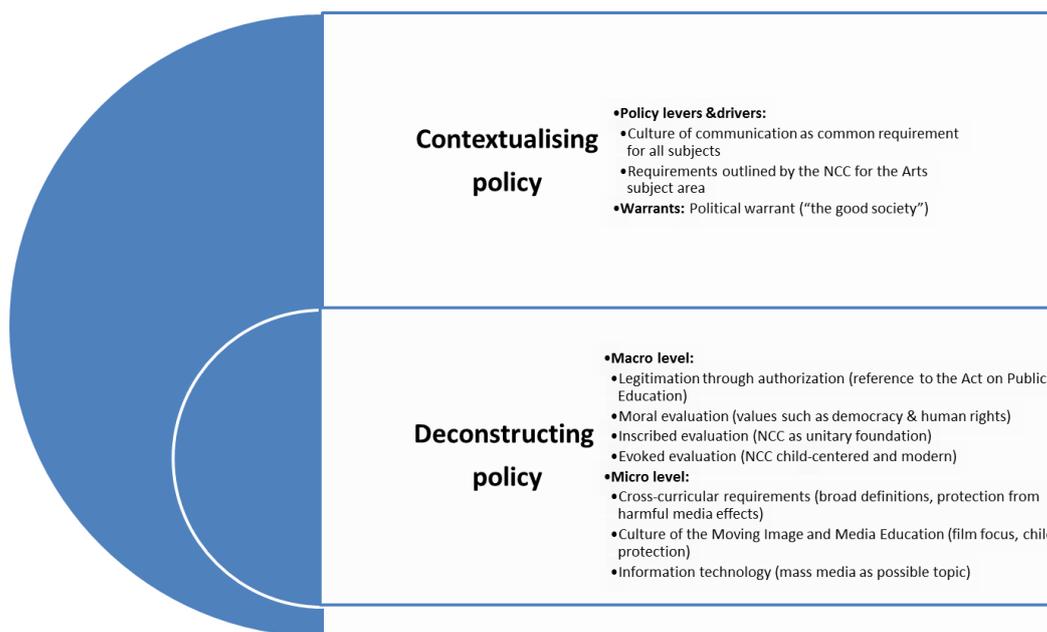
When it comes to the linguistic aspect, the authors use a succinct description of what has to be taught and what is required from pupils. Most of the sentence lacks verbs, which makes the communication impersonal. Where there are verbs, the third person singular is being used: e.g. “He/She has the ability to consciously use the mass media” (NCC, 1995). However, there is no definition of what “conscious use” means. The requirements are sentenced in similarly broad and generalizing terms. This can be explained by the role envisaged for the National Core Curriculum: that is should be only a basis on which local curricula can be built. Unfortunately, this educational model lead to many misunderstandings. As one author observes for another subject: “Geography teachers were expecting a NCC that, as usually, would specify when and what should be taught during Geography classes.” (Utone, 2004, p. 98).

Last but not least, it is important to note that as early as 1995, the subject Information technology also contained topics connected to media literacy.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present and analyse the 1995 National Core Curriculum from the perspective of media literacy education. This was the first Core Curriculum ratified in the new democratic Hungary. The adoption of this document was proceeded by fierce debates among the different political camps, a mass media frenzy and political battles. By presenting the political landscape and the relationship between politics and policy-making, my goal was to highlight how the NCC became a document in which different ideologies and discourses collided. The 1995 NCC presented a new approach to education, since it was intended to be only an aid for preparing school-based curricula. In **Figure 2** below the synthesized results of the analysis have been outlined.

Figure 2: Synthesized results of CDA-analysis NCC 1995



In terms of media literacy education in Hungary, 1995 was a very important milestone: activists successfully lobbied for the introduction of the *Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education* subject. The micro-level analysis revealed that what we call today media literacy not only is addressed in the *Culture of the Moving Image* subject, but also in a specific cross-curricular requirement (*Culture of Communication*). The emphasis in the cross-curricular requirement is mainly on protection from harmful media effects. The micro-analysis also helped in revealing the mass amount of content on film and aesthetics in the stand alone subject. While film culture is widely addressed in the *Culture of the Moving Image and Media Education* subject, print media and radio are mentioned only once. With an emphasis on film aesthetics, the critical and social studies aspect of media literacy (e.g. the role of media in society, civic participation through media) remained mostly undiscussed in the NCC. And lastly, an interesting aspect that was found was the appearance of mass media in *Information Technology*.

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