Interview with Carl Heath

Carl Heath is the Vice President of Education at RISE – Research Institutes of Sweden, and the Special Counsel for the Protection of Democratic Dialogue, charged by the Swedish Government to lead a national mission to strengthen media and information literacy in Sweden. At RISE, he leads RISE applied research in education, and also leads the RISE mission to be a leading actor in professional education. Prior to his current work, he worked in research and development projects regarding ICT, interaction design, design thinking, learning and culture. He has also conducted design work or other project activities together with a large range of actors, from government institutions and ministries to Disney Imagineering, H&M, Commission of the European Union, Nordic Council of Ministers. Before working at RISE he was the founder of GR Experiential Learning (now a part of The GR Pedagogical Centre). He studied at the University of Gothenburg, where he combined work in political science, social science, pedagogy and ICT. www.carlheath.se

Center for Media Literacy (CML): Please tell us about your involvement in media and information literacy.

Carl Heath (CH): I have two vocations in Sweden. One is my day-to-day job as the director or Vice president President of Education at Swedish Research Institutes, RISE – Research Institutes of Sweden. There, my role is to work with educational issues in applied research. We do applied research work within the context of education, but we are also an education provider in the applied research field. The research institutes in Sweden have about 2,700 researchers and one of the things I do is to see how we can tap that knowledge in education-at-large in Sweden. Working with education in media and working with digitalization of education, I've found that media and information literacy is quite an important part of the applied research that we are doing in the education field.

Then, as of August 2018, I was appointed by the government in Sweden to be the special counsel for the Protection of Democratic Dialogue, which is a newly-formed function with the aim of leading a national initiative on media and information literacy in Sweden for the population at large. In that initiative, we are also targeting special interest groups, such as older adults. That work started out in the middle of autumn 2018 and it is going to run up until the autumn of 2020. That's a large part of my work at the moment, setting up and organizing this national initiative.

CML: Having media and information literacy recognized at the policy level and being able to start embedding those processes in various government agencies and functions is a dream come true for the MIL field. We've all been working towards that

goal for many years. This initiative is fairly new and also cross disciplinary; it is an ideal example of what we want to see happen. What are some other initiatives in MIL that are taking place in Sweden?

CH: We have an agency that is the Swedish media agency, which has worked with MIL for a long time; they've been a part of the UNESCO context, and their primary focus is young people. Now, their work has received increased recognition by the government, and they are strengthening their offerings in organizing and addressing issues in the MIL space.

That work parallels the national initiative on the Protection of Democratic Dialogue that I am leading. There's also another government initiative targeting schools. About two years ago, we introduced reformed curricula where we have strengthened offerings in digital competence for Swedish students in the primary end of the secondary school system. We've introduced programming from age seven, with the first grade program in the mandatory in all schools, starting this last autumn, 2018.

We've also strengthened the work on understanding digital literacy in the context of social sciences in both primary and secondary school. There's a set number of different initiatives and the one that I'm leading is not so much targeting the other agencies or the work that the government does, as much as it is focused on outreach work, looking towards the broad population. We are identifying what areas of the population are best to focus on, and whether we need to set a clear focus on gearing resources for MIL to specific demographics.

What kinds of methods and tools are best to reach out? What are some examples of these methods and tools used both internationally and in Sweden? How can we use these materials for these various target groups?

We're just now putting together the basic workflow of how this project is supposed to be executed. Then in a month or so, we're starting a tour around Sweden, where we're putting our feet down in different cities where we are going to meet up with the local leaders and various kinds of interest groups – education and libraries and the elderly environments and civil societies, for example – to find and reach a broader set of the population that we and others are working with. Our goal is to find out how we can give these groups and individuals both tools and the means of understanding media and information literacy in a day-to-day, average life.

Having MIL skills today is a necessity in order to understand what goes on around us in our world. Without those primary digital and media skills, the risk is that some people are left out of quite large discussions in society, and it becomes a clear issue for encouraging democratic dialogue. We're starting with a tour in a month or so, and we're going to be on the road until the autumn of 2020.

Tracking these needs is also a moving target, because as digital tools change over time, the set of skills that we need to be informed and understand our surrounding world become ever-shifting. That's an issue that we have to take into consideration when working with these things – we can make an agenda for now, but it's a moving target that will change continuously.

CML: How does this moving target apply to the audience, which is also a moving target as people move through ages and stages?

CH: In Sweden today, we have about 90% of our population on the internet, and these people all have knowledge about day-to-day work on the internet, but we still have about a million of our population who are not there. Very many of them are above the age of 77, and we have an increasing elderly population. Obviously, if you want to be a part of the modern society, it is an issue that if you're not in tuned or have knowledge about a digital context around you, it's really hard to understand the media world of today. That age group is a really important group to look into and work with.

CML: There's been some research in the US recently on usage of social media and one of the findings was that, it's older adults who tend to share the most online information that isn't accurate.

CH: We do not have data for Sweden, but that said it seems likely that we have a similar trend in Sweden, where an elderly group seems can to be a bit overrepresented when it comes to disinformation spreading. The same goes with obviously other demographics, such as what sort of educational background you have, for example.

CML: What are some of the observations and learnings that you've had as you've work with educating diverse audiences?

CH: Finding a narrative around what you're educating about, that correlates with the target group's interest and context, makes education much easier. For example, when we work with different groups, we try to work with examples, and we work with cases and pieces of information that the group can relate to in their day-to-day lives. Even though we might use the same technology or the same methodology, we might change the content from one situation to the other for that subject matter to be engaging and relevant for that group.

Another situation is about where you are when you are educating and how long a time with the group that you have. If you meet the group in a physical room and have the chance to do a workshop, or if it's a group that we only meet over the Internet, we use different types digital tools. Examining these sorts of situations, and seeing how we can best educate using digital tools, is one of the starting points of our local research. One powerful way of using MIL in teaching and learning is trying to find narratives and ways of speaking and addressing issues that stem from the persons we are teaching themselves.

We have, for example, some methodology where we work with stories that are generated by the target group that we are working with. We started out with asking people to tell us, for example, a situation when they have felt the apathy or disorientation or something regarding media in their day-to-day life and somebody might say, start telling a story about a grandmother who starts sending links that are really out there and inaccurate. If this was your grandmother, what would you

do? What are you and others supposed to do about this in their ordinary world and situation?

Or another example might be to start telling a story about issues regarding complexities, about different groups reading very different information and drawing very different conclusions about a situation that appears. If you are on social media and engaged in civic discourse today, you meet these kinds of MIL situations in your day to day life regularly. Using these examples as a vessel and a tool for exploring and examining is a way to engage people in the discussion – so what does this mean for the individual, for society? What tools can we use to counteract these situations or understand more about them? What can you do on the individual level, and what could we do on a systems level?

Those kinds of questions are much easier to talk about when having the audience express their own story in their own context. It usually becomes very powerful sharing situations. I just had one such situation with a group of librarians some days ago, that resulted in a very heated and engaged discussion about the role of the library in a modern society – when media and information literacy not only happens to be about content, but also very normal and ordinary things, such as how do I use my mobile phone to really know if this a piece of information that comes from the right place or not? There are all these kinds of ways of working, but that's one core example of what we do.

Also, there are many good actors both in Sweden and abroad who do an excellent job designing methods and tools in MIL, so we try to aggregate this information and put it into a structure, to provide other resources while we're out on tour. This gives people an idea of possibilities of using various tools and technologies, so that we can enable others to use that others have and built already.

CML: What do you think is important to your success in the field, as you conduct your needs analysis?

CH: I have this basic thought that as humans, we are provided with one mouth and two ears – listening twice as much as we speak is usually quite a good thing when it comes to understanding and spreading and sharing information. One of the themes of our work is that if we really want a dialogue, we have to step up to listen, and act in ways that really enable dialogue, with all kinds of actors.

That is a complexity in and of itself, but it's really important because otherwise we would only provide information, but we wouldn't actually know if it's useful, if it lands well, or if it's the right approach. It's an iterative process that we're working with, where we will change things over and over again as we understand more about what happens with the people, and when the world shifts and changes around us.

CML: Yes. I think that's one of the really strong characteristics of MIL education today, that education is recognized as an iterative process with different audiences, with different people having different needs, with different purposes. It sounds like you're designing that right into the program that you're going to be pursuing.

CH: Yes. It's also the case that MIL has evolved quite a bit over time. If we look towards the MIL ecosystem that UNESCO has provided, we can see all kinds of various media and information literacies. Today, for example, we can see that there are education institutions are lacking competence themselves when it comes to understanding some certain aspects of media and information that you receive that quite frankly, civic society and other actors are very much more well equipped to, to work with, such as, games and media literacy.

This past autumn, when a new game by Ubisoft was a released, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, we now have millions of people who understand Greek mythology, not through the Iliad or the Odyssey, but through a computer game. Obviously, how that computer game portrays a Greek mythology becomes an important part of understanding media and information literacy today. Where did you get that kind of information from? What does it mean? Is it put into a larger context, etc?

Obviously, if I don't even know that that game exists, and addresses Greek mythology, then I won't understand that the game is much stronger than literature today in informing quite a large audience. If education institutions aren't informed about the media world and its impact on learning, then these institutions will have a hard time actually understanding the world around themselves. As media shifts in and of itself, we need to also look towards our institutions to see how are they empowered, how are they structured to actually meet the needs of media and information literacy in a broader population today.

CML: It's amazing all the different kinds of learnings that there are embedded in these games, and it's important for us to understand that.

CH: It's interesting to me because we have a different set of values towards different kinds of media. We value film and picture media as to be more important in our society than gaming, for example. Most likely because media around games is a much newer thing, but as we can see research start emerging around, for example, how people understand the world through understanding games. We can start to see this narrative shift but it's quite a long way away to see that we have both research systems and systems within our cultural frameworks that could address for instance, games to the same extent that you would relate to literacy in other domains.

CML: Exactly, and of course, millions of people are involved in these games. It was James Paul Gee, who a number of years ago wrote a book what video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. I wish that were a much more widely read book.

CH: Yes, and that research has really sort of grown and matured a lot since Gee's book was published. There are so many findings that I can only agree that it's a field that should be addressed more. It's just the same with other fields, such as MIL around algorithms and algorithmic understanding, and social media. Not only understanding how a text is written, but why did I receive the text to start with? Who was the designer of why I received this text or picture or whatnot? Why would somebody want me to see

this? How are the algorithmic frameworks around the information diet that I received set up? What are the power structures behind that?

That's a totally different field and gaming, but it's an example of another field which is quite new. We have a lot of things that we need to know, and we're most likely just in the beginning of a quite evolving research agenda. How a civic and public debate and discussion are actually carried out, given that our public speech today very often is mediated through algorithms designed not for public domain, but for example, for providing ads.

CML: To have informed opinions, we have an obligation to start understanding what the dynamics are here: What are the implications, what does it mean for the power structure?

CH: Yes, and here we come into a really interesting situation because up until only a couple of years ago, basically 10 or 15 years ago, it was hard to separate data from a physical entity. Most of our laws and regulations today are designed in such a way that they are designed from the viewpoint that you can separate data from the medium. Given where we are in a data-driven digital society, this is obviously something very different today, where a piece of information can be copied one million times without any friction at all.

Such seemingly small things are a very large thing when it comes to, for example, MIL and law, because we have regulations and law that's very old when it comes to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. We need to re-address basic human rights as we go into this more data driven society. We need to start asking again the basic questions: what am I as a person? Am I more than me? Who owns the information that is produced as a consequence of my living in the world today? Is that something that we should take for granted, that it's just like it was, or should we sort of look upon this in a different way today?

CML: Yes, in the past, we were looking at a totally different information environment; now, the digital world really hasn't addressed the notion of property rights. Property rights been addressed in the physical world, where property is physical (such as in real estate) We have no "Magna Carta" to help define property rights in the digital world.

CH: There is a discrepancy because we basically haven't valued our own data, and it's hard for individuals to see the value of their own data. We live in a world where many services are perceived to be free – such as Google and Facebook and all kinds of tools that we use on a day-to-day basis. Obviously, they aren't free because we provide value not through money, but through the data that we provide. How much that value actually is, and who owns that data, and the regulations and structures surrounding that data are really fascinating. There are some initiatives that have just started to emerge. One example is of course Tim Berners Lee, who was one of the great founders of the Worldwide Web, who today says that he is sort of sad that he was a bit wrong when he designed the web 30 years ago.

Now, he's looking towards how to reform or reframe how we perceive the internet through a new platform that he's working on together with MIT called Solid. There's a bunch of such initiatives, where the foundations of the internet are looked upon with new eyes as a consequence of where the internet has evolved to today. Basically, society hasn't addressed these issues around who owns data, where data is accumulated, at what cost, and to whose benefit.

CML: Yes, and there are people like George Gilder, who is predicting life after Google.

CH: Yes. We're starting to see the emergence of a growing internationalization of the Chinese digital market with such companies as Bite Down. It was valued just above Uber today, at $75 billion. It provides the social media service Tik Tok, that is really valuable for the young generation. There's a bunch of other examples of where the old Chinese notion of "made in China" is starting to shift into "created by or designed in China."
The Chinese authoritarian structure obviously offers a different perception of how to handle data, and the relationship between government and companies in China is very different from a western societal perspective. We can now see these Chinese companies emerging, and we're most likely coming into a 10-year timeframe where we might not have this very American domination anymore in regards to a basic internet infrastructure. We can see both Chinese and other actors stepping up their game when it comes to infrastructure on the internet. They're rolling out 5G services, for example.
The basic power structures governing the foundations of the internet are shifting. Yet we are generally without immediate information literacy surrounding what it means to be on the internet, and how using the internet and all its services can really be a limitation for you when it comes to actually understanding foundational and basic human rights. There's the individual level and then there's this global level of MIL. Both of them are shifting, and it's important both from a personal perspective and a state perspective to be wary and understand this shifting process.

CML: They are really big tradeoffs with these different models of how to go forward, and we do need to understand those in depth.

CH: Oh yes. When we look towards our digital world, it's very easy to think of it as being separated from the physical world, but in many aspects it's highly connected. The digital world of Chinese environments or an Indian environment or Swedish or an American are different for many different people. Then also, some countries influence others more. One discussion we have right now in the Swedish perspective is that we use quite a lot of American internet services such as Facebook and Google and Tumbler, for example.
All these platforms over the years have changed their policies and tweak their services in different aspects, where the values and frames sets of those companies come to be also the borders between the values that are represented in the Swedish context, because we use those services. For example, even though we in Sweden

might have a broader perspective on LGBTQ rights, that might not be the case in one or the other of these services. We've become forced into a value system of another environment that we might not have wanted from the start where the value of the core service is so big that it still meaningful to us to have that service. Obviously that risks shifting the narrative in a country such as Sweden, even though that wasn't the intent from the beginning.

   CML: Having these discussions is critical in to preserve cultural values and also to advance them, in the sense of educating. The Democratic Dialogue project that you are heading shows that the Swedish government values this process, and that they're willing to put resources behind it and really see the importance of it. I think that's an example that the whole world can learn from.

   CH: Yes, we will be happy to spread both the goods and the bads of our upcoming work over the coming years so that others can use it to the extent that they want.

   CML: Thank you – we will look forward to speaking with you again. Do you have any other important messages, advice, or thoughts that you want to share?

   CH: One of the most important things that I've come to understand over the short period of time that I've worked with this particular national initiative is how quick the pace is in movements when it comes to media in particular, and in how information is spread. Being on your toes and understanding those shifts is really important. It's also easy to be gobbled up in all that change and losing your footing, but we need to hang onto really foundational basic structures regarding ethics and values and such, that do not change quickly. Being on those two speed levels at the same time I think is critical towards successfully helping people navigate the digital and physical worlds.
   Trying to go fast and slow at the same time – it's very tricky! Because it's risky to become gobbled up by the speed and everything that goes on, but it's also risky to not be true to your values and a more slow pace of society. Equally, yet, it's easy to think that "Oh, it all goes so fast, I might not be interested in this because something new will happen soon enough." That will also put you at risk of not actually understanding the evolving world. It's a balancing act – but we need our foundations.