A New Horizon
Media Literacy Assessment and Children in Europe

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The recognition of media literacy in the *European Audiovisual Services Directive* (Art. 37) and the consequent development of media literacy indicators – applied to all people, even youth and children – are the result of a long process in which organizations such as UNESCO and the European Commission have played an important role, not only in development of the public dimension of media literacy, but also in acceptance of the importance of media education in the political genda.

The UNESCO International Congress on Media Education that took place in Germany in 1982 released the *Grünwald Declaration* on Media Education, ratified by the 19 participating countries, which became the benchmark of why media education should be a central topic in the public debate. The Grünwald Declaration was the first to claim the need for educational and political systems to promote critical understanding and awareness on the part of citizens to allow them to face the media. Seventeen years after the Grünwald Declaration, the rapid technological development in the late 90s caused the congress in 1999, organized by UNESCO in Vienna, *Educating for the Media and the Digital Age*, to establish: "Media Education is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, to freedom of expression and the right to information, and is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy […]." In 2002, UNESCO held the *Youth Media Education Seminar* in Seville, which reaffirmed the creative and critical component of media literacy, highlighting that media education should be included in both formal and informal education on the individual as well as the community level.

Europe: Creating conditions to assess media literacy

For over a decade, both the European Parliament and the European Commission have recognized the importance of media literacy as a central component in na-

tional agendas and in the European agenda itself. These institutions have played an important and active role in the development of media literacy in Europe, and have defined the concept as including two dimensions: the protection and promotion of human rights, mainly regarding the protection of minors, and the social and economical *raison d'être*. The permanent *Safer Internet Programme*,[1] the first step in such protection politics, was created in 1999 to empower parents, teachers and children with Internet security tools. However, the programme also covers other media, such as videos. The *Safer Internet Action Plan*[2] ran from 1999 to 2004.[3] The objective of the action plan is to promote safer Internet use and to encourage, at the European level, an environment favourable to the development of the Internet industry.

In order to achieve this objective, the following actions have been taken:

- promotion of industry self-regulation and content-monitoring schemes (for example, dealing with content such as child pornography or content that incites hatred on the grounds of race, sex, religion, nationality or ethnic origin)

- encouraging industry to provide filtering tools and rating systems, which allow parents or teachers to select content appropriate for children in their care while allowing adults to decide what legal content they wish to access, and which take account of linguistic and cultural diversity

- increasing awareness among users of the services provided by industry, in particular parents, teachers and children, so they can better understand and take advantage of the opportunities of the Internet

- support actions, such as assessment of legal implications

- activities fostering international cooperation in the areas enumerated above

- other actions furthering the objective set out in Article 2.

The basic Safer Internet Program hypothesis was that "Today, young people and children are some of Europe's biggest users of online and mobile technologies". As a consequence, "together with the raising popularity of these new technologies, risks that the numbers of young people and children may face when they are also surfing online, are growing".

On a legislative level, in 2006 the European Council also developed the *Recommendation on Empowering Children in the New Information and Communications Environment,*[4] adopted by the Committee of Ministers at the 974th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies. The recommendation called on EU Member States to familiarize children with the new ICT (information and communication technology) environment.[5] A new *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning*[6] identified the abilities that should be developed: digital competence (critical use of technology), social and civic competence (provide individuals with the tools to play an active and democratic role in society), critical awareness and creative

competence (individuals should be capable of assessing the creative expression of ideas and emotions spread by the media). The same year, the European Parliament issued *Recommendation 2006/952/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on the protection of minors and human dignity,*[7] which emphasized the need for teacher training in the field of media literacy, as well as the inclusion of media literacy in the curriculum in order to protect children and, at the same time, to promote responsible attitudes among all users. All of these initiatives fostered the media education (and literacy) policy.

In parallel, from 2000 to 2008, the European Commission have launched several initiatives to promote digital and media literacy among the EU Member States: a high-level expert group advised on the development of these actions; studies were carried out; and, gradually, the outcomes were reflected in changing the Commission's strategy from the promotion of Digital Literacy[8] to "Public policies and stakeholders initiatives in support of Digital Literacy".[9]

Promoting Digital Literacy

The European Commission requested the implementation of a course of action: to promote Digital Literacy within the *eLearning Programme*. In order to do so, the EU commissioned a study "to identify and analyse a limited number of successful and innovative experiences for promoting Digital and media literacy and identifying strengths and weaknesses…" The report, called *Promoting Digital Literacy. Understanding Digital Literacy* (2006), carried out by the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), focused on these aspects: a) the identification and analysis of a limited number of successful and innovative experiences that have helped promote digital and media literacy, b) the strengths and weaknesses of these experiences, and c) the drawing up of recommendations for the implementation of promoting a digital literacy course of action.

Digital Literacy High-level Experts Group

As part of the *i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion,*[10] the European Commission set up a *Digital Literacy High-Level Experts Group*[11] to provide expertise and guidance on digital literacy policies in preparation for the *Commission Communication on e-Inclusion*. The experts, representing industry, academia and civil society, were invited to comment on the findings of the *Digital Literacy Review* the Commission had produced as part of its commitments resulting from the Riga Declaration in 2006.[12]

In parallel, focusing exclusively on media literacy, the European Commission set up the *EU Media Literacy Expert Group,*[13] which included experts representing both the role of the media industry in media literacy and that of academic research, in order to analyse and define media literacy objectives and trends and

therefore highlight and promote the best practices at the European level and propose actions to follow in promoting media literacy.

Based on the findings of the Media Literacy Expert Group, the European Commission launched in 2006 a *Public Consultation,*[14] a questionnaire that sought the public's views on media literacy in relation to digital technologies and information about initiatives in commercial communications, as well as in the cinema and online world. The replies showed that the correct way to speed up progress in this field would be to spread regional and national good practices in media literacy. "It also emerged that criteria or standards for assessing media literacy are lacking and that good practices are not available for all aspects of media literacy."[15]

In the second half of 2007, a study entitled *Current Trends and Approaches to Media Literacy in Europe*[16] was commissioned by the European Commission to the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The study maps current practices in implementing media literacy in Europe, confirms the results of the aforementioned consultation, and recommends measures to be implemented in Europe to increase the level of media literacy. It also outlines the possible economic and social impact of an EU intervention in this field.

In 2008, the European Parliament adopted the resolution on the *Report of Media Literacy in a Digital World,*[17] which had been scheduled (November 24th) for consideration in a plenary session by Christa Prets on behalf of the Committee on Culture and Education. It required EU Member States to pay systematic attention to the development of media literacy. The Parliament urged the European Commission to develop an action plan on media literacy and organize a meeting with the Committee on Audio-Visual Media Services in order to facilitate information exchange and cooperation on a regular basis.

European Audiovisual Media Services Directive

As mentioned, efforts to make digital and media literacy a key element of the development of the information society in Europe were concluded in the enactment of the *European Audiovisual Media Services Directive,*[18] which was incorporated (in December 2009) into legislation in all Member States of the European Union, introducing for the first time the need to promote media literacy into a regulation of the media system.

During the past ten years, the initiatives have changed from protection to promotion of active policies aimed at improving citizens' media competences. The European Commission has set the philosophical and legal bases for media literacy development, both in Europe and in its member countries. Thus, it is expected that in the coming years we will see increasing participation of more – new and traditional – actors in media literacy issues: NGOs (non-governmental organizations), families, municipalities, the media, authorities, teachers' associations, journalists, lawyers, etc. The communication and education policies of each

country will be designed to properly promote the development of media literacy in their population and, thus, stimulate universal media literacy.

The central point of the above-mentioned Directive is the proposal to measure media literacy competences using new media literacy indicators. To meet this objective, in 2009 the European Commission commissioned a European consortium led by EAVI (European Association for Viewers' Interests) to perform a *Study on Assessment Criteria for Medial Literacy Levels,* directed by José Manuel Pérez Tornero and Paolo Celot.

The study proposes a new framework of media literacy in order to find criteria or assessment for media literacy levels. The starting point of the framework is the concept of media literacy developed by international organizations, such as UNESCO and the EU. Emphasis is placed on the themes that emerge from the latest Communications and Recommendations of the European Commission (*Communication on Media Literacy*, *Report on Media Literacy in a Digital World*, etc.). Thus, in the study, the definition of media literacy is in accordance with the one formulated by the European Commission: "Media literacy is the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts. Media literacy relates to all media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies."[19]

Conceptual map of media literacy

Using the European Commission definition as a basis, our study integrates different concepts of media literacy in a systemic way in order to highlight explicitly the media literacy skills that should be acquired and measured, where possible, at both individual and country levels. Therefore, the study distinguishes between two fundamental dimensions, individual competences and environmental factors.

Individual competences

Individual competences refers to the personal, individual ability to exercise certain skills (access, use, analyse, understand and create in relation to the media). These skills are found within a broader set of abilities that allow for increasing levels of awareness, the capacity for critical analysis, a creative problem-solving capacity and the ability to create and communicate content, i.a., when participating in public life.

Among the individual skills relating to media literacy, we can identify the following components:

a. Use skills: a component centred on the relationship between the individual and the media as a platform; it refers to the technical dimension (instrumental and operative abilities required to access and effectively use media communication tools).

b. Critical Understanding competences: a component centred on the relationship between the individual and the content (information – attribute of the message; or comprehension – attribute of the individual), that is, a cognitive dimension.

c. Communicative and participative abilities: a component related to the technical and cognitive abilities in different fields – social relations, creation and production of content, and civic and social participation – which involves personal responsibility.

These abilities allow for processes that range from a simple contact to the creation of complex cooperation and collaboration strategies that use media tools as their base.

Environmental factors

Environmental factors are a set of contextual factors that affect individuals and are related to: media education, media policy, cultural environment, citizens' rights, the roles that the media industry and civil society play, etc.

It is important to highlight that media literacy is the result of media education and an environment that stimulates creative participation in and through the media. However, how can we secure this enabling environment? The aforementioned study *Current Trends and Approaches to Media Literacy in Europe* developed aims to do this by focusing on the following aspects:

1. Educational activity for school systems and families

2. The active role of laws and regulatory authorities

3. The role of media industry

4. The tasks of civil society

Why? Because all of these aspects influence media literacy levels; therefore all of them must be taken into account when thinking about promoting media literacy.

The conceptual map (Table 1) enables further elaboration of the media literacy criteria and the key environmental factors, which hamper or facilitate the development of media literacy in the EU countries.

Children's media literacy

Literacy in relation to children includes the following strategies in the context of new values: a) critical understanding; b) appropriation of media; c) autonomy and responsibility; d) creativity; and e) social relations and participation.

Based on the above-mentioned conceptual framework – which considers the dynamism and complexity of the phenomenon of media literacy – the assessment criteria consider some indicators that measure not only the use of media,

Table 1. Framework of Basic Criteria to Assess Media Literacy Levels

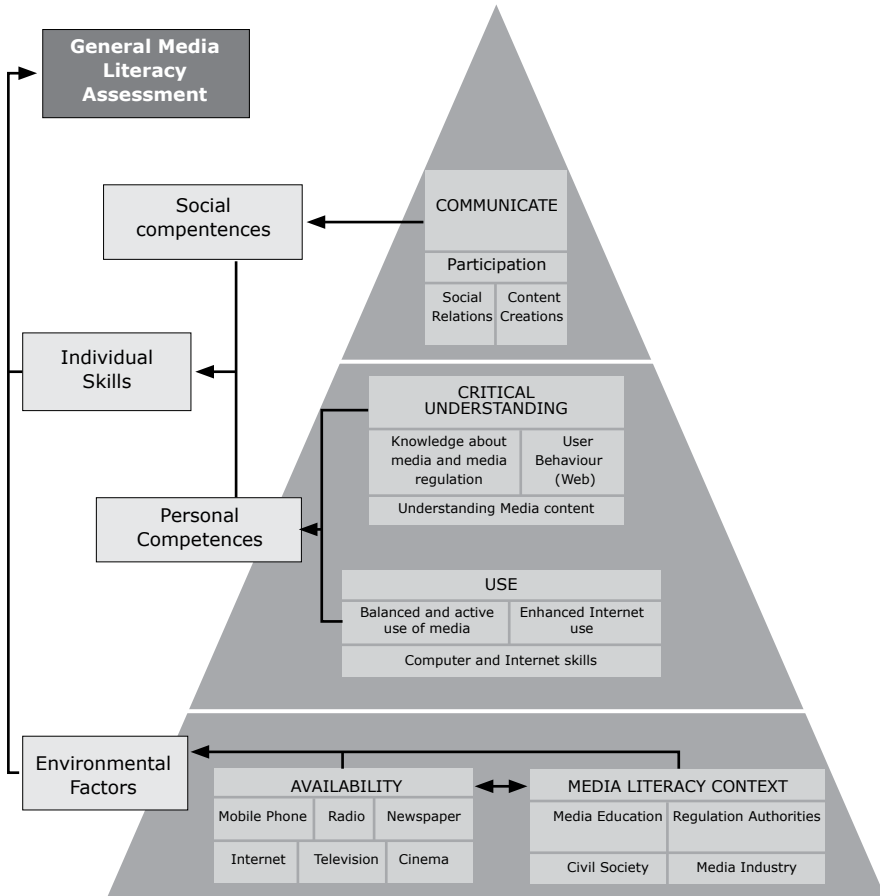| DIMENSIONS	CRITERIA	OBJECTIVES
INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCES	• Use skills (technical) • Critical Understanding (Cognitive competences) • Communicative abilities	• To increase awareness about how media messages influence perceptions, popular culture and personal choices; • To provide the skill for critical analysis; • To provide the creative skill to solve problems; • To develop the capacity of production; • To consolidate communicative rights; • To develop intercultural dialogue; • To consolidate democracy; and • To develop active and participatory citizenship. (Among others)
KEY ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS	**MEDIA AVAILABILITY** • Supply of media **MEDIA LITERACY CONTEXT** • Media Education as a process to develop Media Literacy capacities. • Media Literacy policies and regulatory authorities. • Media industry role and activity in relation to media literacy. • Civil society role and activity in relation to media literacy.	

but also the critical competencies and creative and communicative abilities, such as citizen participation skills.

The following pyramid (Figure 1) illustrates the dimensions and criteria for measuring media literacy levels and the ways in which they are reliant on each other.

The base of the pyramid illustrates the pre-conditions of the Individual competences: media availability, that is, the availability of media technology or services; and the media literacy context, which is the activities and initiatives of institutions and organizations aimed at fostering media literacy capacities. Without these two criteria, media literacy development is either precluded or unsupported. They share the same level because, although they are autonomous components, they are, to a degree, interrelated; media literacy policy is carried out in the context of availability, and certain aspects of availability are conditioned or influenced by the context.

Thus, media literacy does not exist in a bubble. It is affected by a variety of dynamic factors and facilitates interdependent skills and competences to allow individuals complete participation in the new digital world. As a consequence, it is assumed that environmental influences (education, institutions, industry, etc.) affect the way in which individual skills develop: educational opportunities and favourable environmental factors produce better educated and developed

Figure 1. Structure of the Media Literacy Assessment Criteria

individuals. However, these factors do not guarantee a specific result. Research cannot encompass all the variables that may potentially affect a particular process.

The Individual competences are illustrated by the second level of the pyramid, which begins with Use, a secondary prerequisite of media literacy development. Use is the intersection between availability and operational skills, which are practical skills involving a low degree of self-conscious awareness.

Then follows Critical Understanding, which is the knowledge, behaviour and understanding of media contexts and contents, and how it manifests itself in behaviour. It includes all the cognitive processes that influence the user's practices (effectiveness of actions, degree of freedom or restriction, regulation and norms, etc.). Use requires knowledge; this factor requires meta-knowledge (knowledge

about knowledge). This allows the user to evaluate aspects of the media, by way of comparing different types and sources of information, arriving at conclusions about its veracity and appropriateness, and making informed choices.

The apex of the pyramid represents Communicative Abilities, which are the manifestation of media literacy levels, the quality of which rests on the success or failure of the lower levels. These are skills that manifest themselves in communication and participation with social groups via the media and in content creation. This is the highest degree of media literacy.

As can be seen, media literacy is the result of dynamic processes between the base (Availability and Context) and the apex (Communicative Abilities). The route from the base to the peak is Individual media competence (Media Use and Critical Understanding).

However, because media literacy refers to the individual's relationship with the media, the type of individual referred to in the study cannot be found in reality. The individual in focus in the study represents the average of the attributes of the individuals surveyed in each country, or an average individual who represents the average condition of the individuals in his or her country.

New horizons, new challenges

Referring to the contextual factors, the above-mentioned study *Current Trends…* has identified the emerging orientations related to the role of actors in the field of media literacy, namely:

a. media convergence as a pervasive reality in Europe;

b. the growing concern for the protection of users, mainly children;

c. the general public's critical awareness;

d. the growing presence of media literacy in curricula;

e. a more attentive and responsive media industry;

f. the active participation of civil associations (of parents and teachers);

g. the participation of European institutions and the emergence of regulatory authorities.

The study also focused on the importance of the basic participation of active stakeholders – European institutions (EC, EP, CoE, UNESCO), regulatory authorities, educational systems, civil society (citizens, consumers, families) as well as the media industry – for the development of media literacy, and discerned the following aspects:

- sharing responsibilities (emissary and receptor)

- shift from protection to promotion focus

- combining interpretative (critical thinking) and productive elements (media production skills)

- combining formal and informal education

- combining civil actors and educational actors

On the other hand, one of the conclusions of the *Study on Assessment Criteria for Medial Literacy Levels* was that it is not possible to build a purely mathematical model to measure the exact media literacy level of every country, because there is a partial lack of information of the context or the individual (attitudinal) relations to the media. Some components are more difficult to measure than others, and media literacy needs to be approached as a dynamic phenomenon. It should be clarified that, considered individually, the indicators can highlight no more than the sum of their data, but when considered holistically, the results generate an aggregate measure that allows us to draw workable conclusions.

In 2010, the Danish Institute of Technology (DIT) and the Oxford Institute of Technology have become responsible for testing and refining the development of these indicators.[20] This assures an emergent paradigm of research, namely:

- It will be necessary to transfer the principles and system of indicators to micro-collective situations, institutions, etc.

- On the other hand, it is necessary to develop more qualitative and precise indicators with the objective of applying them to specific individuals and at different stages of development.

- Finally, these indicators must be improved to be applied to measuring development in relation to children and the media environment.

We are therefore facing a new horizon of research, the perspectives of which can be very helpful in the following respects:

- The study of cognitive abilities of children in relation to the media (and the conditions of sociability that the media open), analysing the development from purely technical and operational capabilities to higher capabilities that contain a certain degree of consciousness and critical sense.

- Analysis of how these indicators can help to promote the child's own psychological development and the educational stimuli that s/he receives.

- The specific analysis of the media conditions conducive to the development and environment of children.

More research for practical objectives

Thus, there is a need to develop new indicators for achieving the following practical objectives:

1. Available forms of assessment and diagnosis of the impact and consequences of certain cultural settings, media, social and institutional development of skills and communicative behaviours, and the need to compare them.

2. To establish and evaluate frameworks for the development of media education programmes and target special audiences with both general – to increase the basic media literacy – and specific "how to" purposes, such as the dissolution of cultural barriers.

3. Establish guidelines to promote the creation of content and media sharing situations conducive to the development of children's media literacy skills.

In summary, the on-going *Study Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels* opens a new horizon of opportunities in relation to children and media and for building a new style of media education based on new competences, critical understanding, creativity and participation. It is a long road that must be developed during the next decade.

New paradigm

It is no exaggeration to say that we find that the new paradigm of research, from the framework developed, gives us the opportunity to establish policies for international cooperation in the field.

This will require strong and renewed efforts of interdisciplinary groups and different cultures and nationalities, who will share the idea that in science, measuring instruments, diagnostics and evaluation are necessary. They are in the base of the development of appropriate policies.

Notes

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