

How the Economic Crisis in Europe Promotes Media Literacy

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The article examines the impact of the economic crisis in Europe on media quality and advocates that although the crisis has jeopardized communication and education, and created serious social and political problems, it promotes a new attitude towards the media which can be considered as a new awareness towards it. A new state of affairs is emerging in which media literacy is needed and its promotion is more important for individuals as well as the public at large. This demand for media literacy requires a new policy and new initiatives. Media education, the promotion of the conditions that foster media literacy and civic participation become the main areas of this movement.

The article examines research projects and other initiatives aimed at developing media literacy throughout Europe. It highlights the EMEDUS, FilmEd and DINAMIC projects.

Keywords: media literacy, European economic crisis, media crisis, EMEDUS, DINAMIC, FilmEd

From economic crisis to media awareness

“The level of complexities in contemporary societies”, as stated in the introduction to the 2013 MILID Yearbook, “continues to develop exponentially. There is no doubt that the global village as we know it today will become more complex in the coming decade. Inequalities, misunderstandings and ‘soft conflicts’ may increase on a planet increasingly interconnected and subject to rapid intercultural exchanges” (Grizzle, Torrent & Pérez-Tornero, 2013 p. 9).

Without a doubt this is the case with respect to the economic crisis in Europe. The European economy in crisis has, in turn jeopardized communication and education. The result is that these converging crises create serious social and political problems.

Paradoxically, on the other hand, the converging crises promote a new attitude towards the media which can be considered as a new awareness towards it. A new state of affairs is emerging in which media literacy is needed and its promotion is more important for individuals as well as the public at

large. Whatever may be lost with respect to the quality of the media can be recovered by increasing public awareness towards it.

The media in crisis

The sharp decline in the European economy – particularly in southern Europe – has created varied problems in relation to media. These include the loss of public confidence in the media and in the political sphere; the collapse of public broadcasting; the precarious contractual situation of journalists and the increasing commercialization of the media sector.

Along with the economic crisis comes news of political corruption and scandals which now occupy much media time. The lack of faith in the political system is on the rise as is the lack of trust in the traditional media which did not denounce the situation in time (and in many instances were themselves involved). Hence, social networks have seemingly become a more reliable vehicle for the news and a means of mobilizing people. This has created a new way of doing politics via the social networks and, as a result, a new media competence has emerged which is closely linked to the social protest groups embodied by the ‘occupy movements’ in Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and France.

The catastrophic deterioration of the public media – one of the most consolidated of European traditions – is already evident in some countries. On the morning of November 7, 2013 in Greece, the police cleared out the headquarters of the public television station which had been closed by government decree. The same happened on November 29 in Valencia, Spain with the closure of the Valencian regional television station. These were not anecdotal cases of little importance but a sign of the times. Given this deterioration, the European Parliament itself has drawn attention to “the fundamental role of a genuinely balanced European dual system, in which private and public sector media play their respective roles and which shall be preserved ...” especially when, “... in a multimedia society in which there are now greater numbers of commercially-driven global market players”. If this balance is upset, as the Parliament warns, public media loses its main function, namely: “their institutional duty to provide-high quality, accurate and reliable information for a wide range of audiences, which shall be independent of external pressures and private or political interests” (European Parliament, 2013, p. 10).

The precarious state of journalism is also evident in Europe’s economic crisis. With the loss of resources, companies reduce costs, fire journalists and the quality of information suffers. Investigative journalism, which takes time and resources, begins to be replaced by a kind of superficial journalism which is not very analytical in nature.

At the same time the commercialization of information increases which

lowers the quality of the content as media are in search of larger audiences. There is an increase in site advertising, infomercials and advertising control to the detriment of content. The concentration of the media in fewer hands has also increased and pluralism is being threatened. Hence, higher risks in relation to preserving privacy and security of communications.

The new demand for Media Literacy

These drastic changes as reported, enable European citizens to become aware of what is being lost in this media crisis with its dire consequences on democracy. This is why there is a stronger demand for improved media literacy, which means a greater awareness of the media and, at the same time, the improvement in the skills to obtain information and communicate.

When the old communication order breaks down, regulations fail and the balance that has preserved citizens until now starts to become upset, then media literacy is presented in this context as an appropriate response: a good way to solve many of the problems highlighted.

This demand for media literacy requires a new policy and new initiatives. Media education, the promotion of the conditions that foster media literacy and civic participation become the main areas of this movement.

Research and Media Literacy

This situation enables an alliance between research and the media literacy movement in Europe.

The UNESCO-MILID Chair at the UAB¹, guided by the Department of Communication and Education, UAB, is actively participating in these new lines of research committed to the development of media literacy.

The EMEDUS project, in collaboration with other universities and research centers in Europe, has described and analyzed the treatment of media literacy in different European countries. The results and conclusions lead to proposals for the future. The study recognizes that, in recent years, many European education systems have advanced in the introduction of digital skills. However, few educational contexts have paid sufficient attention to the general media environment. This means that the critical capacity of students with respect to the media is not what it should be; nor do students develop a vigilant attitude towards the excesses of advertising and the commercialization of media content.

The solution proposed by EMEDUS is to proceed with a re-draft of the compulsory curriculum of EU states to adapt it to the overall media environment - and not just in the instrumental implementation of ICT². On the other hand, it

would also be necessary to enhance the area of informal education by ensuring that schools become communication centers, both within and towards the outside world.

EMEDUS also draws attention to the fact that the crisis within the public media services is seriously undermining the possibility of educating an actively critical public. Only with the recovery of the public media can this situation change, according to the findings of EMEDUS. The media can serve as a reference of independence and quality with respect to information. And it can actively contribute to the education of the public at large by providing critical awareness. For this to happen a new commitment is required of public media towards audiences and new channels of participation need to be encouraged that can only be activated by empowering citizens through media literacy.

This new commitment would also be valid for the print media and quality journalism in general. Without an audience that is motivated, cultured and caring (that is to say media-literate), neither quality journalism nor even the continuation of journalism itself seems possible any longer.

FilmEd, another project carried out by the Department of Communication and Education, is working along the same lines as indicated above with EMEDUS. FilmEd supports a European education policy that is capable of introducing film studies in education. In so doing it would improve media literacy (in this case the language referring to audiovisual language) and at the same time it would broaden the rich cultural background European cinema possesses.

Another research project of the Chair, DINAMIC, highlights the need to improve systems for assessing media literacy as an essential instrument for effective public policy. Through various tests and experiments DINAMIC attempts to gather under a single structure a system of evaluation for both instrumental skills related to the use of media as well as for the critical and creative attitudes of people. Special emphasis has been placed on the capacity to solve problems and develop projects using the media and its content. Similarly, the connection between this capacity and the necessary critical understanding of the media sphere as a whole has been recognized.

Our hope is that all this research will lead to an improvement in policies and actions related to semiotic literacy in Europe in the coming years.

A new Journalism

In addition to the research projects cited above, the Chair is also involved in projects related to international journalism as a way of responding to the economic crisis.

Within the current context of crisis there is a profound need to regenerate European journalism. Its inability to assess and react to -from a democratic

point of view- the outbreak of the Arab Spring and its following of the policies, often myopic, of European governments on political issues; its difficulty to analyze and explain the human drama of immigration in the Mediterranean basin and Eastern countries; its difficulty to face the challenges that cultural diversity implies within Europe. All these issues demand a global change within European journalism, in its genres, routines and structures.

The MILID Chair is working towards helping address this challenge. The launch of a network of young journalists around the world committed to the spirit of MILID has led to progress and a milestone: The Young Journalists Platform³.

From 2012 to 2014 meetings have been held to try to activate this network in Barcelona, Cairo, Fez, Kingston (Jamaica) and Sao Paulo. And local news rooms have become the platform in each of these cities. In them, journalism students and researchers of media and information literacy have committed themselves to working together online on journalistic issues to foster global dialogue. The aim is to promote collaborative journalism of quality – and informed in terms of the media literacy perspective – which, from addressing issues of common interest, integrate different points of view – cultural, geographical, human – and indicate a path for intercultural dialog and international cooperation in solving global problems.

And all of the above is from the perspective of collaboration between young and experienced journalists of all nationalities working together.

The result of this journalism will create:

- An opportunity for constant experimentation capable of supporting research on media literacy
- A basic tool for the overall education of journalism students
- A platform to the service of media education
- A basis for secondary schools worldwide to access the treatment of current affairs within the perspective of intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and media education.

In 2015 the platform is expected to be operational linking all continents and actively connecting more than 40 journalism schools worldwide.

New challenges

The challenges we face in the immediate future deal with the consolidation of all these initiatives and the dissemination of the results of the progress made. However, as a whole, these challenges will be organized into the following areas:

- The consolidation of the International MILID Observatory and the *MILID Scientific Journal*. With this objective in mind the Department of Communication and Education will carry out in the coming years the implementation of a European Observatory on the subject.
- The creation of a global MILID school favoring the mass production of courses, research programs and graduate degrees, etc.
- The commitment from and support of the Chair towards the Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy.
- The extension of the Young Journalists Project.

It must be noted that all this is in keeping with the commitment to create new alliances and find new partnerships within Europe and beyond.

References

- Grizzle, A., Torrent, J. and Pérez-Tornero, J.M. (2013). MIL as a Tool to Reinforce Intercultural Dialogue: Principles and Aims of the UNESCO-UNAOC UNITWIN Cooperation Programme on Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue. In: U. Carlsson & S. Culver (Eds.). *MILID Yearbook 2013: Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue* (pp. 9-15). Sweden: Nordicom
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Notes

- 1 Media literacy projects by the UAB and the Chair can be found at the following websites: www.eumedus.com; www.filmedeurope.wordpress.com; www.dinamicuab.blogspot.com.es
- 2 It must be stated that this practical and limited use of ICT's as mere instruments is produced as an effect of the communicative and socio-cultural potential they possess.
- 3 More information can be found at: <http://www.youngjournalists.org/>

Notes on Research Projects

FilmEd PROJECT

CONSORTIUM

The FilmED Consortium is composed of partners with a diverse set of expertise in order to respond competently to the requirements of the study. It will provide a study with reliable data on the situation of educational use of audiovisual content in schools throughout Europe. It is coordinated by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in partnership with: The Think Tank on European Film and Film, AEDE, the European Association of Teachers (Association Européenne des Enseignants); CUMEDIAE, acronym for Culture & Media Agency Europeaisbl; Dr Guido Westkamp.

FOCUS:

The general objective of the study “Showing films and other audio-visual content in European Schools - Obstacles and best practices” will be to support the European Commission in its current efforts to develop a European wide media literacy policy, especially the inclusion of media literacy in school curricula. Our Consortium aims at providing a study with reliable data on the situation for educational use of audiovisual content in schools throughout Europe. And in particular, specifying the obstacles and good practices within the field, considering the three requested angles: educational, legal, and the report with the film industry.

The objectives of the research are three-fold:

Firstly, a European-scale study identifying and analyzing the existing situation concerning the use of audio-visual content in schools throughout Europe. It will include both curricular and extra-curricular use of such content in schools paying exclusive attention to primary and secondary schools.

Secondly, identification of obstacles and good practices for the use of films and other audio-visual content in schools, including licensing models for education use;

And thirdly, the elaboration of recommendations on how to strengthen the commission's work within the context of media literacy policy and in other policy fields.

DINAMIC PROJECT

FOCUS:

DINAMIC -Developing Media Literacy Indicators aims to develop new measurement systems to assess the development and quality of media literacy, which could be applied not only to countries, but to 1) Individuals and groups, 2) Companies, corporations and institutions, 3) Public institutions of participation and decision making, e.g. in the field of active citizenship and political participation.

The project has developed a set of criteria, metrics and evaluation of media literacy competences, which includes both, a comprehensive indicator system and a set of methods, procedures and protocols (test, questionnaires, as well as observation and measurement systems) refined and ready for use by different institutions. This indicators system will be valid and ready for use, and will complement the European indicators.