

EAVI STUDIES ON MEDIA LITERACY IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT *It is predicted that media, in all its forms, will grow between ten and one hundred times its current volume over the next decade. Therefore, over time the three basic literacy skills of reading, writing and arithmetic will no longer be sufficient. People are also increasingly required to develop advanced skills in critical thinking, in order to decode the messages delivered by media. This type of new literacy is called media literacy (ML). The article presents a brief description of the results of wide comparative studies covering all 27 European Union Member States, conducted by the author in consortium with other partners for the European Commission. The results served as a basis to draw up future scenarios and perspectives for media literacy in Europe, outline emerging trends, and propose international expert recommendations which indicate priorities to develop new, concrete initiatives. The European Association for Viewers' Interests (EAVI) studies are some of the most comprehensive across Europe to date in terms of their purpose and scope. They highlight that the ultimate focus of media literacy is the development of individual critical understanding and the acquisition of skills sufficient to participate in social and political life, fostering active citizenship and a full democracy.*

KEY WORDS

EAVI STUDIES, EUROPEAN UNION, MEDIA LITERACY AND METHODOLOGY

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This text draws from previous articles, speeches and talks by the author.

The advent of a new media age has created a new environment which allows potential and extraordinary communication mechanisms and new forms of active participation throughout public life and democracy. However, in order to become fully involved in concrete activities and active citizenship, it is essential to acquire new knowledge.

Today, the three basic literacy skills of reading, writing and arithmetic are not enough. Citizens now are required to develop advanced skills in critical thinking in order to decode the messages delivered by media. A new type of literacy must be fostered – namely, media literacy.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA LITERACY

It is predicted that media, in all its forms, will grow between ten and one hundred times its current volume over the next decade. Thus, in the current environment and in view of future innovation, it is no longer an advantage to be media literate; rather it is a debilitating disadvantage not to be. In many countries educational policies acknowledge this new requirement. In Europe, the European Union recognizes its strategic value.

Here follows a brief description of the results of a wide comparative study covering all 27 EU Member States conducted by the author in consortium with other partners for the European Commission. All relevant issues are taken into account: components, definitions, dimensions, objectives, programme, historical evolution and many more.

EAVI's studies also offer elements targeting a first comparative analysis among the Member States. They report on the EU framework legislation and the role played by international institutions. They are available on the website of the European Commission's Media Programme.¹ These studies lay out future scenarios and perspectives for media literacy in Europe, outline emerging trends and propose international expert recommendations which indicate the priorities to develop new, concrete initiatives.

ASSESSING MEDIA LITERACY LEVELS – OUTLINE OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

In 2009, EAVI coordinated a study on behalf of the European Commission DG Information Society, on *Assessing media literacy levels in Europe* (Celot and Tornero, 2009), providing a comprehensive view of the concept of media literacy. The objectives of the study were to provide an understanding of how media literacy levels should be assessed in Europe; to help the Commission carry out its obligation to report on media literacy levels in the 27 EU Member States; and to recommend the approach needed in order to implement concrete policies at European Level. The Study therefore sought to analyse, quantify, and thereby measure, the levels of media literacy across Europe. To do this, media literacy as a concept was broken down into its component parts, so that available

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/media-literacy/index_en.htm (29.11.2012).

data could be collated and used appropriately. EAVI also participated as a consortium partner in a previous *Study on the current trends and approaches to media literacy in Europe* coordinated by the Barcelona Autonomna University, again concerning the 27 EU Member States. A third, more technical study was coordinated by the Danish Technological Institute, together with EAVI, and providing criteria for testing and statistical validation. EAVI again participated, relying on the technical expertise of the other partners.

The 2009 EAVI Study is one of the most comprehensive studies across Europe to date in terms of its purpose; it is groundbreaking in its ambition and scope. Here follows a brief outline of the challenges, processes and findings of this study. Measuring the competencies necessary to interpret the flow, substance, value and consequence of media in all its forms was an ambitious undertaking because media literacy is a complex construction, expressing intrinsically many different ideas and streams of thought. As a function of geography alone, it was a question not only of 27 countries and 20 different languages, but also numerous different denotations that changed depending on their application.

The Consortium was therefore initially required to identify and agree upon a definitive and reliable framework for ML. This involved analysis of the full panoply of concepts and definitions of media literacy, as well as their evaluation and comparison, so as to arrive at a universally applicable and practical model. However, and perhaps unsurprisingly considering the multiplicity of approaches and definitions, a conclusive, universal interpretation proved unworkable – as has been the case for more than twenty years.

As a result, the Consortium instead sought to measure separately the individual properties that make up media literacy, thereby more appropriately addressing the discipline, not only at its broadest, but also through the plurality and detail of its component parts. It was then decided that the study should examine the connections between these properties, so as to translate them into indicators.

While some properties appeared to lend themselves better than others to measurement, others were immune to any mathematical reduction. As a result, a pure mathematical model appeared to be unsuitable for reliable analysis of media literacy. This is also because media literacy must be approached as a dynamic phenomenon, as a process of communicative interaction between different agents in a rapidly developing environment. On this basis, the Study identified two dimensions within media literacy: one flowing from an individual's ability to utilise the media; the other informed by contextual and environmental factors. These are identified in the Study as Individual Competences and Environmental Factors.

The first dimension, Individual Competencies, can be split into: (a) Use – an individual technical skill; (b) Critical Understanding competency – fluency in comprehension and interpretation and (c) Communicative – the ability to establish relationships through the media.

The second dimension, Environmental Factors, is defined as a set of contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the development of the Individual competencies. It includes the following areas: (a) Media education, (b) Media Policy, (c) Media Availability, (d) Roles of the Media Industry and Civil society.

Within each field, indicators have been identified. Although the data is incomplete, because much of it remains unavailable, the properties identified have been processed at European level so as to generate results sufficient for drawing preliminary conclusions.

FURTHER CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS OF MEDIA LITERACY

While it is true that technology enriches the lives of citizens across Europe, the concept of media literacy needs to be considered as central and distinct from the almost exclusive emphasis previously given to technology. The ultimate focus of media literacy, in fact, is the development of individual critical understanding and citizen participation. Critical understanding should be identified as the key factor in the development of ML policies. This includes policies aimed at enhancing the capacity to understand media content and function, increasing knowledge about media context and enabling sound judgment in order to adopt appropriate user behaviour.

As regards, citizen engagement, it is now widely acknowledged that media play a vital role in promoting democratic values. There is a painfully ironic dichotomy between the wealth of media available and the informed use that citizens make of it. Therefore, it is imperative for citizens to become media literate, so that they may participate in every aspect of public life and in the democratic process. They must be equipped with the skills to utilise, and therefore to benefit from, media.

The models proposed by the studies are amenable to legitimate criticism as they take their point of departure from concepts that are in a constant state of flux. Critics however struggled either to reject the adopted method in its entirety or to identify an alternative approach better suited to the purpose.

OVERALL POLICY CONTEXT

Even if citizens must be equipped with the skills to use and benefit from the media, occasionally a strong policy commitment to promote media literacy is found to be lacking. It seems that the interests of certain Governments may not be compatible with the interests of their own citizens. It is important to reflect upon the real intentions of the respective Governments and upon what they do (or do not do) to promote media literacy activities.

If some governments and politicians act not in the interest of society, but solely in their own specific interests– or possibly those of the lobbies that funded their electoral

campaigns – they simply aim to perpetuate their own power. Their actions translate into an abuse of power, for they did not receive mandate from their voters to carry out such actions. It is the author's conviction that in order to promote media literacy effectively, politicians and decision makers at large should be provided with the necessary, relevant information in order to promote public debate and awareness of media literacy through European, national and local information campaigns.

Furthermore, to foster a democratic culture and shared values, the role of civil society organisations and related media literacy initiatives should be sustained. It should facilitate a more effective participation in the public sphere and allow for the activities of representative citizens' institutions. Finally, it should encourage active involvement by the media industry – especially audiovisual media. This should include literacy enhancing initiatives, such as those already noted in the press. Special attention should be given to mass media – including traditional and digital, public and private platforms, content and processes. The training of media professionals should also be considered a priority. Mass media therefore have to assist the democratic process.

We have already recalled the central role played by media in our society. They occupy a large share of our daily lives. It is sufficient to mention our continuous use of tablets, video game consoles, mobile phones, internet, television and other traditional and contemporary types of media. These sources of information form the basis on which we shape our idea of the world and the political processes that governs it. There is no real democracy without citizen participation, and there can be no citizen participation without critical awareness. In this sense, to be capable of using media effectively furthers the exercise of people's fundamental rights.

Media literacy, therefore, is also represented by the acquisition of skills sufficient to participate in social and political life, which allow full citizenship. This is not only from the point of view of a single individual, but also from a collective public perspective. To gain awareness and understanding of the resources, process and systems in which media move, and to contribute to a real understanding of the issues which society faces.

Bearing in mind these new social interactions opened through the new media, the citizen can now play an active role in seeking to communicate and to improve his own conditions. Our culture is becoming, albeit not without contradictions, a culture of media participation (Jenkins, 2006). What has been discussed above underlines the importance of media literacy in this context: it plays a role in reinforcing the democratic processes essential to exercise freedom of expression and the right to information for all people. Furthermore, contributing to the creation of an open and dynamic cultural space, characterized by the active participation of citizens, constitutes one of the pre-requisites for the full and active exercise of citizenship.²

² "In this world of rapid technological change and globalization of information, media literacy forms a building block for freedom of expression and the right to information and is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy. Today media literacy is indeed one of the key pre-requisites for active and full citizenship and is one of the contexts in which intercultural dialogue can be promoted successfully." (Buckingham, 2003: 34)

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ISTRAŽIVANJA EAVI-A O MEDIJSKOJ PISMENOSTI U EUROPI

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SAŽETAK *Predviđa se da će se količina svih oblika medijskog sadržaja tijekom idućih deset godina povećati između deset i stotinu puta. Zbog toga će tri temeljne osobine pismenosti – čitanje, pisanje i računanje – biti nedovoljne. Od ljudi se također sve više zahtijeva da razviju napredne vještine u kritičkom razmišljanju kako bi mogli dekodirati poruke koje šalju mediji. Taj novi tip pismenosti zove se medijska pismenost. Rad donosi sažet prikaz rezultata istraživanja koje ja autor, u suradnji s drugim partnerima na projektu, proveo u 27 država članica Europske unije. Rezultati omogućuju predviđanja o daljnjem razvoju i perspektivama medijske pismenosti u Europi i novim trendovima te nudi preporuke međunarodnih stručnjaka koji ističu prioritete kako bi se započelo s konkretnim i novim inicijativama. Istraživanja organizacije EAVI (The European Association for Viewers' Interests) jedna su od najiscrpnijih dosad u cijeloj Europi, kada se gleda njihova svrha i opseg. Ona naglašavaju kako je temeljno središte medijske pismenosti razvoj individualnog kritičkog razumijevanja te stjecanje vještina dostatnih za sudjelovanje u društvenom i političkom životu, što će omogućiti aktivno građanstvo i potpunu demokraciju.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

STUDIJE EAVI-A, EUROPSKA UNIJA, MEDIJSKA PISMENOST I METODE ISTRAŽIVANJA

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