

# Media Literacy and Media Appropriation by Youth

Nowadays everyone would agree to the growing, urgent need to enhance the understanding and the capacity of process analysis within Media Literacy and Media Education, given the increasing influence of the new media upon life styles and behaviours of all citizens, but especially the younger ones.

Indeed, the twin issues of awareness-raising and developing processes to improve media literacy present all Member-States of the European Union, as well as the rest of Europe and the world, with a major challenge.

Somehow, it is less important to recognize the problem of media literacy than to discuss how to foster the development and use of educational tools that would help the young generations, today and in the near future, to better develop a critical and informed attitude regarding the media.

It is precisely with this need in mind that several media professionals, teachers, researchers and other representatives of institutions and organizations from Europe, but also from other regions, decided to share their experiences, practices and especially their reflections at the 3<sup>rd</sup> EuroMeduc seminar that took place in Faro, Portugal, at the Research Centre for the Arts and Communication — CIAC, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of the University of the Algarve. This was the latest seminar in a preparatory cycle that led to the final Euromeduc congress. It took place on October 16–18, focusing on the main subject of Media literacy and Media Appropriations by Youth.

There is widespread awareness of the development of a variety of educational processes that may lead to equally diverse degrees of media literacy. This is a major challenge for each of the Member-States of the European Union, as well as for the rest of Europe and

the world. With this in mind, several researchers, mainly from Europe, but also from other regions of the world, debated countless questions and shared their perspectives about how to foster the development and use of educational tools intended to help the young generations, today and in the near future, to better develop a critical and informed attitude regarding the media. We could identify two major approaches of media literacy appropriation by the youngsters: one, more specific to the appropriation of films upon different channels and screening devices, and a second related to a more global perspective of appropriation concerning general aspects of citizenship and information empowerment.

Regarding the perspective specific to film, it is important, on talking about the concept of media literacy, not to forget how fundamental it is “to teach how to use the media”, to analyse, to produce and to disseminate audiovisual media. It follows that media education concerning cinema, or at least film languages, should be supported by three principles: film screenings, film analysis and film basic production.

First of all, concerning film screenings, it is necessary for the students to acquire basic knowledge of some reference works or genres, in order to understand the narrative process of any sequence of images. On the other hand, film analysis would provide an opportunity to make a global reading and understanding of the films, the moving images, or of selected sequences. In this context, several elements would be clarified which would allow the interpretation of diverse codes inherent to the cinematographic language, thus making it possible to understand and interpret the various aesthetical and technical elements that may characterize, select and organize the continuing flow of moving images

Further on in the appropriation processe, as regards the elements of basic film production it is essential that the students are able to think along with images and sounds, in order to produce them through their own codes and through their own languages with the same proficiency as required by the patterns of eloquent discourse within any other media.

Finally, it is necessary that students gain a global vision of the modern ways and possibilities of cinematographic distribution and dissemination, namely through the internet.

In addition to affording a method to learn the key elements of cinematographic environments, this knowledge also provides a way to motivate the students and to secure better pedagogical results, as demonstrated by many practical experiments in various regions and countries.

Our daily experience shows that the world we live in offers numerous ways to support film devices in the scope of new media. This matters more for setting a new relationship between the users and these resources than for the specific mediat performance they were originally designed for. As a consequence, it is very important to draw a line between the playful environments, as a main characteristic of the digital space-cyberspace, and their ludic dimensions that would generally entail some dispersion and conflicts. In more specific terms, the latter might also offer mechanisms of identity affirmation and cultural belonging to groups and communities, probably virtual ones, though endowed with their own kind of structure.

In light of the above, and as regards the use of the new media, namely within the many forms of film languages, it is important to see them as a possible way to foster a desire to see and to analyze other message contents, of a different cultural, ethical and aesthetical nature to the most predominant ones. This might lay the groundwork for a new culture of responsibility to be possibly adopted by young audiences, but also by the producers who see them as their target group, whether it is good or bad.

In conclusion, according to this more specific perspective of the appropriation process, Media Education is a very important tool that will allow the production of more personal, more playful media messages than those of film, while nurturing the development of new skills and abilities concerning this powerful medium.

If we take a more global perspective, a leading aspect worth considering is the separation, sometimes almost a divide, between the concepts of “information literacy” and “media literacy”. After all, although these concepts are inclusive and complementary, there is still a need for differentiation between both conceptual approaches. Actually they have been framed differently in various proposals. Along these lines, Unesco, one of the organizations with an active role on information literacy, has been developing some practical initiatives concerning the fields of teacher training, basic and secondary education and life-long learning. They have also established guidelines and policies to promote local initiatives as well as global frameworks and curriculum development, all intended to include information literacy within those issues. This local and global approach builds upon the assumption that, nowadays, the educational paradigm has shifted due to information storage not being an educational challenge any longer. Instead, it supports the need to learn and to process that same information, which is stored through the old and the new media every day within each educational process, formal and informal. The main aspect to be concerned with is the fact that those educational processes need to be rerouted towards knowledge and information handling instead of data storage.

Moreover, with the fast growth and the subsequent convergence of the traditional means of communication and new technologies, general media education methods have necessarily to apply to all media forms and supports, irrespective of their nature and of the technologies that may be used. This calls for a new kind of media literacy, namely regarding the local and global ways of appropriation of the internet. It entails the need to develop a strategy to bring together, at least for this purpose, rich and poor countries and their populations all over the world.

Besides these main ideas about the differentiation between information and media literacy, there was a common idea, shared by almost all the experts and reflecting a desire to collapse the concepts of information literacy and media literacy into just one single approach. Ideally, the main goals supposedly pursued by both processes would merge too. As a result, the limitations of all determinist communication or information paradigms would be overcome, a more cultural vision of the media, media education, media literacy processes would emerge. If the cultural dimension of this vision of the media, media education and media literacy processes is to be enhanced, nothing is more important than the access and the critical usage of the new media, in order to understand all of their dimensions, whether related to specific contents or to their functional aspects, like social networking, for example.

The use of new media helps us realize that some traditional splits have become really obsolete. For example, games and other virtual environments, as well as modern society in general, make the line drawn between Arts and Sciences look terribly “old-fashioned”.

This is due to the artistic and technological skills required for the production of games and other new media environments: they embrace both high technical skills and complex aesthetic notions. Within the new media there is a transformation of the artistic and literary tradition, as we know it from the traditional canons, into something with a more fragmentary

structure and mosaic-like texture. Still, nowadays, we witness how media narratives are undervalued, as a result of being displaced by an excessive preoccupation with the new technological aspects only.

Those paradigmatic changes all point to a clear necessity to tap the educational values of “gaming” and “networking” in this era of new media (again the distinction between learning through media, or about media, or with media was highlighted). A model has yet to be developed along the lines of the 3 C’s of Media Literacy: cultural, critical and creative.

To achieve these goals we must stay the course of our different approaches to the main subjects. However, those approaches will have to promote top down and bottom up processes equally if they are going to succeed. Indeed full consideration should be given to cultural differences. As a matter of fact, Europe has developed a culture based on a large amount of ethnocentricity and needs to value other approaches more. In this context, the Unesco recommendations may help take a more global perspective likely to assist in coping with a variety of educational, cultural, social and political agendas, through a process of cross-fertilization and mutual pollination. Today, more money is being spent on research aimed to provide a global perspective on the subject of Media Literacy. This is in itself a positive trend, but still we need to reflect and to discuss more about these problems: Would it be possible to find a global approach? The answer is probably no. Different cultural environments and their languages inform different ways of thinking and different ways of interpreting the world around us and therefore different ways to use and analyze the media. Moreover, we need also to consider that different youngsters, with distinct social and cultural backgrounds, have a different relationship with media.

We also need to realize that technology is not a big monster and that it isn’t aimed just for young people. In fact, media literacy is more and more needed among the older generations. The empowerment that technology skills may offer can be a big opportunity to all of us. We all agree that technologies are what we want them to be, and their use provides us with tools to face the new “dangers” —risks and opportunities of the world. But we need to understand them in order to use them properly.

However, with the fast development of social software and digital media, it becomes really easy to produce messages and publish them in the public space. The audiences become authors and consumers become producers, assuming everything goes well. This means that the traditional paradigm of Media Education —Media Literacy is now not enough, because it educates mainly readers and nowadays the target constituency has expanded to include authors as well. We need to train them to be responsible authors, requiring them to develop the same sense of responsibility that has been requested from television channels so far. Now, our students must become also responsible for the production of their contents and not only for their study: we must make them able to know what and how to publish in the public sphere not to breach other people’s rights —a responsible citizenship paradigm.

So, from a global perspective on Media Literacy, we may well see the need for a double shift: a shift from a determinist paradigm to a cultural one —media aren’t devices, they are cultures— and it is not enough just to introduce them for having changes made, it is necessary to study their culture, their main contents and forms; another shift from the critical thinking paradigm to a new paradigm that may be more concerned with active citizenship of the youths.

In short, we may conclude that the leading aims regarding the issues of Media Literacy and Internet Appropriations by the youth are:

- To bridge the gaps, through documenting the relations between the institutions' and peoples' practices both in school and in real life interaction with media;
- To develop new methodologies: educational methodologies and research methodologies based on cooperation, dialogue, creativity, as well as cross-cultural understanding and the capacity to observe the problems from an ethnographical point of view, considering their civic and generational active perspectives and experimentation possibilities;
- And finally, to discuss themes that may contribute to develop solutions within the main frame of different representations, appropriations, values, diversity and cultural identity.

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