Media literacy for children: empowering citizens for a mediatized world

Julio-Cesar Mateus
Universidad de Lima, Peru

APA Citation:

Abstract

Becoming a critical user of media is a premise for citizenship in contemporary times. The use of critical thinking skills in mediatized scenarios demands developing the ability to interact with media, not only in being able to use devices, but also for understanding their socio-cultural effects. Our recent pandemic and political circumstances have raised our levels of awareness about fake news and biased media opinions. Here, I contend that we need to consider three basic arguments that should be taken into account when thinking about media literacy: Access to the internet constitutes a human right, though that is not enough, as we must develop critical media literacy skills as well; media policies should focus on the empowerment of citizens; and media literacy education policies must address the initial and continued professional learning of teachers to ensure its success.

Keywords
media literacy, media and information literacy, media competencies, media skills, teacher training
Media literacy for children:
empowering citizens for a mediatized world

To exercise a political right

In 2016, the United Nations passed a resolution that deemed access to the internet as a basic human right. It affirmed that every right a person has must be protected on the Internet, particularly, freedom of speech. The resolution also recognized the internet’s global and open nature as an opportunity for progress, including the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It was also declared that the quality of education plays a decisive role in development, therefore, it was considered to be imperative to foster media literacy while aiding access to information on the internet as a tool for facilitating the right to education.

In the current Covid-19 context we should recall the importance of having access to plural and independent media in order to have informed decisions be released from authentic sources. However, regulating media is not enough when the users of social media are also helping to generate misinformation. It is here where media education for content creators needs to occur from an early age.

The Oxford English Dictionary named *post-truth* as 2016’s word of the year, defining it as a way of modelling public opinion by appealing to our emotions and personal beliefs. During 2020, with the pandemic propagating worldwide, the flow of fake news became rampant. The World Health Organization has designated this situation as an infodemic; that is as something that needs to be recognized and neutralised (Zarocostas, 2020).

Indeed, we are witnessing truth erosions and institutional crises which are characteristic of a post-modern world (Chomsky, 2018). Many people trust algorithms and search engines more than human editors of information (Logg et al., 2019). While the information monopoly of companies such as Google and Facebook is widely discussed, we tend to rely on them more than on our own critical skills. It begs the question: Is it possible to freely exercise a right while depending on technology?

This phenomenon can be a major contributor to the loss of credibility by experts and specialists. In its place, the new information standard is produced through exchanges between peer communities in social media. Almost half the world’s population uses social and non-traditional media to access information, according to a global study conducted by the Pew Research Center (Mitchell, Simmons, Matsa, and Silver, 2018). This shift in information sources has garnered more attention regarding the effects created by filters and bubbles on virtual environments, through echo chambers that distort our perception of reality (Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

Media education has the potential to help individuals to exercise their political right to attend to these matters. To invoke citizenship in this context is to talk about citizenship in the media as a digital
concern. At the same time, it entails talking about gained or intensified citizenship through the use of technology (Gozálvez-Pérez, 2011; Mateus, Andrada and Quiroz, 2020).

UNESCO’s proposal to push Media and Information Literacy education posits an openly political answer stemming from the defense of basic human rights (linked to liberty and political participation). It puts forward third-generation rights through the formation of critical skills to participate in the public sphere, as well as being able to face technologies instead of being dependent on them.

From protectionism to empowerment

Over time, the fundamentals of media education have varied, ontologically as well as within their objects of study and applications. Concerns over the failures of formal education made educators blame media saturation for children’s learning problems, and even their moral ‘disorientation’; ideas which are still held true by some educators (Alfaro, 2000: 181). Previously, media education was seen as a way to “inoculate” individuals from the harmful effects of media. Then advocacy for citizen empowerment was considered to be a better way to cultivate resiliency when engaging with media. For example, “Cultural critics who had formerly adopted the inoculation approach now began to be interested in the potentials of media for art and education, the ‘creative media approach’” (Hoechsmann and Poyntz, 2012: 146).

The protectionist approach was promoted over the creation of narrative models which guarded the interests of media over citizens, while the empowerment approach proposed the formation of citizenship and the fostering of critical skills. This second ‘emancipatory’ approach conceptualizes literacy as a complex sociocultural practice which embodies, reflects and disputes power relations. Certainly, critical literacy is not limited to analysis, but rather it aims to equip people with skills for responsible and free speech in a mediatized world.

The educational interest related to media can be correlated with technological advancement and the new dynamics generated in the process. Likewise, academic development on media education is also linked with communication. In the late 90s, the most popular definition for media education focused on mass media and pedagogy. Its main goal was to foster media messages’ critical reception. Moreover, this definition went beyond mere aesthetic appreciation– which was an important element at the dawn of European media education– with its focus on ideological aspects pertaining to manipulative power, social relations and knowledge’s social construction. This shift reshaped teaching practices and relationships with students, aiming to demand from both greater focus on the cognitive skills necessary for understanding how media operates, which interests media promotes and what their representations signify. Unnecessary technology purchases were criticized, as well as the indifference shown about learning how media undermined the teacher’s role beyond the classroom. A desire for the development
of new curricula with new competencies neared, as well as the requirement to redefine when and where learning occurred (Tella, 1997).

The National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, took place in 1992 in Maryland, USA. It helped the shift from a protectionist approaches towards critical empowerment for individuals. The current and most extended theoretical definition of media competencies was proposed there: a citizen’s ability to access, analyze and produce information towards specific goals (Aufderheide, 1993: 6).

Originally media education started from a distrust towards mainstream media (Masterman, 2003: 191). Additionally, the struggles to protect the ideals of a critical and cultured society were promoted which meant that unnecessary radicalism and prejudice were justly critiqued. However, the protectionist approach later acquired a sense of opportunity, looking to exploit the possibilities of user appropriation in media (users were no longer regarded as passive content consumers but rather producers and critically users of media). In contemporary times and with the convergence of participatory culture theories (Jenkins et al., 2009) these notions have been extended.

Pérez-Tornero (2013), regards the current era as being eclectic. He maintains that it combines the power of creation – with user-centered social media– and the generation of content with the culture of convergence and participation. Within the European project Transmedia Literacy, over 50 researchers from eight countries were able to recognize and organize and map 44 main and 190 specific capabilities attributed to teenagers in informal settings, outside schools. These skills range from problem solving processes in videogames to production and exchange of content on social media platforms; the creation, production, exchange and critical consumption of narrative content (e.g. fanfiction, fanvids) by teenagers is also a part of this (Scolari, 2018: 8). Their research confirmed an approach centered on empowering “prosumers” who are capable of initiating and taking a proactive approach with media consumption.

**Education**

The current education scenarios are vastly different to the one educators knew when they began teaching media studies. The new compass for these changes is marked by media digitalization. Ola Erstad (2010: 90-91) highlights four of these:

1) The surge in participatory culture presented by Jenkins (2006), with new ways to participate and share in society. Additionally, the gradual breaking down of boundaries between online and offline worlds.

2) The ability to easily access information, a significant difference from the book age.

3) The possibility of omni-channel and multimodal communication.

4) New types of content production with the infinite range of possibilities brought by apps.
Recognizing the ways in which our mediatized society operates is fundamental for understanding the current era. Mediated and mediatized should be differentiated. Mediated describes communication happening through a specific medium. Mediatized alludes to structural shifts in society affecting different cultural, economic and political layers stemming from the media omnipresence. Thus, the mediatization theory helps to understand the presence of media in society not only as channels transmitting communication (mediation), but as how they reshape (and create) relations amongst individuals and institutions that use them and who depend upon their logic and procedures.

Although traditional research on media has focused on determining the influence media has on society and culture (e.g. the effects advertisements and media have on citizens; how the press influences political inclinations and what are the effects of videogames on children and teenagers), all of this should be rethought under the lens of the new context brought by media. This context is defined, by the mediatization of cultures and societies (Hjardvard, 2016), as well as how and why it is constructed and for whose benefit (Ramírez-García and González-Fernández, 2016).

With the introduction of social media in the mid-2000s, media has evolved to include social platforms from which many humans get their information. The meaning of what is social has human relations and everyday life as its basis. What is social, in fundamentally mediatized nature, does not only reside within each individual’s mind, but also in material processes (e.g. objects, relations, infrastructures, platforms) from which communication and construction of meaning take place: “The more intense our social life feels, the greater its recursive dependency on technological media of communication” (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 4).

Media training for educators must begin from a social and cultural understanding of media. In many countries, teachers receive media education within a prescriptive paradigm centered in the use – correct or incorrect – of ICT, and which only values them as tools for better teaching experiences. This is why it is vital to overcome the technologist paradigm (Mateus, Andrada and Quiroz, 2020). The incorporation of aspects from media education in school curricula does not constitute a definitive solution to the problem on its own, though it may be a first step towards garnering attention on the impact of media on culture, as well as discussing its role on the new education paradigm that specialists talk so much about.

The access to media inside and out of schools, or the unprecedented situation of having to depend on media for education during the pandemic, are issues that may represent a new imperative for media education. The imprint of education technology has commonly been accompanied by the false revolutionary premise of media as devices whose sole existence improve education quality. Nonetheless, literature on the topic concludes that guaranteeing access to devices is not enough to overcome the media divide, instead, it suggests shifting towards developing skills which will allow critical and creative interaction with media. Thus, revolution is not inside devices, but in the motives
behind why we bring them to school. As Cuban (2011) stated, there is little evidence that investing in technology achieves substantially better results in teaching practices or learning improvements for students. Access to new technologies do not necessarily bring any positive changes unless perhaps they are accompanied by a new education paradigm. This paradigm could start by accepting that the school experience is incomplete when it undervalues knowledge and skills students obtain by any informal means. It could also demand that learning experiences designed to establish a dialogue with students’ interests, and constructed preferably through ICTs outside school, will be beneficial.

Conclusion

In this context, education in media for teachers could prevent media from being perceived as simply external tools for citizens. The usage of media to facilitate learning processes, or for motivation, is not media education. Media education aims to foster the exercise of a political perspective centered on liberty and responsibility. It is less an instrumental outlook and more a humanist one that should be at the heart of teacher education.

Following Abreu et al. (2017), it contended here that it is fundamental that educators value four relevant transformations in their media education: (i) the transformation of mass media into convergent media, emphasizing the opportunities these bring; (ii) the passage from an analytical or productive approach to a combined one, replacing consumption for interaction, and consumer for user; (iii) going from literacy towards multiliteracies, taking into account the elasticity of media education; (iv) the transformation from schools to communities, considering that more frequent media usage often occurs outside school.

In sum, media education should not be viewed as a panacea (Bulger and Davison, 2018), but as a condition for our development as citizens in a mediatized ecosystem. Media literacy should be thought of, as Paulo Freire (2005) claimed as an example of being literate, and as a liberating process that will allow understanding and changing one’s own reality when reviewed and critiqued effectively.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding statement

Institute of Scienfitic Research (IDIC), University of Lima
References


**Author biography**

Julio-Cesar Mateus, PhD in Communication, is a Full Professor at the Department of Communication of the University of Lima. He is also Editor-in-Chief of the academic journal *Contratexto* and Coordinator of the Communication and Education Research Group (IDIC-Educom). His research focuses on media education, communication theories, and digital culture.