

# Children and Media Literacy: Critique, Practice, Democracy

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## *Abstract*

*The article points at main hindrances to media education and media literacy – for which many voices have propagated since long. Besides the urgent need for training of media educators, the conclusion is that most in need of media literacy are, in fact, the media themselves.*

## **What is media literacy?**

What do we mean by ‘media literacy’? Concepts and definitions vary.

People who speak of ‘media education’ often refer to the school and the role that the school can play in order to media-educate children and young people.

When the concept of ‘media literacy’ is used, it often refers to the knowledge we ought to get both in and outside school and, continuously, when we are grown-ups. ‘Media literacy’ implies that we all must be media literate – not only children and young people, but also parents, schoolteachers and other media educators (e.g., in many voluntary organisations worldwide), as well as media professionals and politicians.

Media education can, thus, also be seen as one process of achieving media literacy. Other processes are awareness-rising and learning by doing oneself.

Besides, there are other common concepts, such as 'education for communication' (through the media), 'communication for social change' and 'communication for development', implying that everyone must learn to use the media in order to participate in the societal process towards increased democracy. That is, communication should contribute to empower the audiences and enable them to participate, from a bottom-up perspective, in changing their everyday lives and local community.

The latter examples of concepts are more explicitly used in Africa, Asia and Latin America than in richer parts of the world, and often imply a collective societal process for change. The Western concepts and definitions more often focus on the individual's independence and media criticism.

However in the prolongation, the Western notions of media education and media literacy often include thoughts of democracy, participation and active citizenship, as well (for instance, that media literate persons are seen as being able to express their well-informed opinions in the private and public spheres).

With the development of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), it has also become usual to talk about 'information literacy' ('internet literacy', 'digital literacy', etc.).

However, one cannot simplistically strain the differences between the concepts. For example, at a conference with 41 invited media educators and media researchers from 33 countries held in Vienna, Austria (Recommendations to UNESCO 1999), the participants agreed upon principles, which 'media education' ought to embrace, whatever it is called. Among the jointly shared viewpoints were that media education must deal with all communication media; should enable people to gain an understanding of the way the media act and operate in society; and must ensure that people learn how to analyse and critically reflect upon media messages, a critical reflection that is often obtained by people's own media production.

Thus, individuals and groups must gain, or demand, access to media not only in terms of reception but also of production. Everyone should have the right to information, freedom of expression, participation in society and building a sustaining democracy. In this context, media education also has a critical role in – and should be responsive to – situations of social

and political conflicts. In addition, media education should be present in all possible contexts during the entire life span and should aim at empowering all citizens, not least ensuring that those socially and economically disadvantaged have access to it (ibid.).

When it comes to children and youth, a traditional viewpoint is that media education or media literacy means that young people should be protected – kept from watching certain TV programmes, and the like. But more and more experience and best practices worldwide show that if young people are allowed to produce media themselves or take part in the media production processes in other ways, they will gain a critical understanding of how media constructs the world, who owns the media and which are the interests and aims behind the media contents. Thus, young people will get increased media competence, their self-esteem will be strengthened and their interest in society will often be enhanced through taking part in ‘real’ media with real audiences, inspiring them to improve their own or others’ situation in the local community. With that, some steps towards active citizenship and increased democracy could be made (von Feilitzen & Bucht 2001).

Inherent in the concept of ‘media literacy’ is that empowering children and youth – as well as adults – through promoting their media knowledge and their involvement in media production is in itself a means of protection, since in this way they become critical against the media and increasingly media literate.

This shifting of emphasis from sheer ‘protection’ to ‘promotion’ (which, thus, also contributes to protection in itself) has lately been reflected in the definitions of several organisations, media educators and researchers. For example, Ofcom, the authority for the U.K. communications industries, recently decided to define media literacy as ‘the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts’ ([www.ofcom.org.uk](http://www.ofcom.org.uk)). Ofcom has also commissioned reviews of media literacy among children and young people (Buckingham 2005) and adults (Livingstone, Van Couvering & Thunim 2005).

The European Commission, which, among other things, has financed media literacy projects, set up a media literacy expert group, launched a public media literacy consultation, and started an on-going EU-wide survey of best practices regarding media literacy, defines media

literacy as ‘the ability to access, analyse and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages [...], as well as to communicate competently in media available on a personal basis’ (ec.europa.eu).

The Prague Declaration (2003), emanating from an international information literacy meeting of experts organised by the U.S. National Commission on Library and Information Science and the National Forum on Information Literacy with the support of UNESCO, includes the following formulation: ‘Information literacy encompasses knowledge of one’s information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand’

There are, consequently, signs of a convergence of the meanings of the different concepts of ‘media education’, ‘media literacy’, ‘information literacy’, ‘education for communication’ (through the media), ‘communication for social change’, ‘communication for development’ and other relevant concepts. It might be that a common understanding of what media literacy means is spreading over the world. At the same time, it is important to remember that media literacy must be adapted to, and grow from, the local level, why media education and media literacy in practice always must be seen in the specific cultural and societal context where it is exerted and achieved.

### **The realisation of media literacy**

The challenge is to bring into being the right to media literacy for all. In practice, the process of making all citizens media literate has not undertaken effective forms, although a few countries, such as Canada and Australia, are quite well ahead when it comes to media education in school. Interest in media literacy generally has also grown in certain countries, such as Japan, the U.S. and several European nations. But for the most part media literacy initiatives, where they exist, are grass-roots movements, based on single idealistic teachers and voluntary organisations.

And yet – the idea of media literacy is nothing new. Film institutes and educational radio and television in several countries have since long offered film education, as well as cour-

ses and programmes about the media. In Sweden the governmental radio investigation of 1960 had in its report an ambitious part (227 pages) with suggestions on media education and research at all levels (SOU 1965:21). UNESCO has supported a range of international and regional conferences and seminars on media education and media literacy since the 1980's and asked for publishing in the 1970's a Finnish media researcher's book on media education (Minkkinen 1978).

Also, a range of other national and international meetings on media education has been organised, for example, the meetings of the World Council for Media Education (in 1996, 1998 and 2000), the Summit 2000: 'Children, Youth and the Media – Beyond the Millennium' (Toronto 2000), and the two international forums of children and media researchers (in 1997 and 2000).

One may wonder at this sluggishness during the past 30-40 years in realising media education in practice on a larger scale, especially since the attitudes towards media literacy seldom are negative. Not least has the clamour for media literacy become louder after the enormous spread of television channels since the end of the 1980's, at the same time as films for home video have flooded over the world, and, later, when computers with internet connection are spreading, and the video and computer game industry has become the fastest growing and most profitable entertainment business aimed at children and young people. In addition, cell phones are multiplying exponentially. The number of mobile customers around the world reached 2,6 billions in 2006 with two-thirds of these customers in a developing country ([www.comminit.com](http://www.comminit.com)). This means that there are more than twice as many mobile costumers than the estimated 1,1 billion internet users in June 2007 ([www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)) who are heavily concentrated to North America, Australia and Europe. And cell phones facilitate mobile access to the Internet.

The rapidly changing media landscape also implies a convergence of media, such that radio, film, television, digital games, newspapers, books, etc., are available on-line. This convergence means in its turn diverging media contents and an almost unlimited possibility for the audiences to choose what to see, listen to, and read – and what to themselves generate on the internet.

One fundamental reason for the louder voices for media literacy is the fact that the changing trans-national and converging media landscape more and more lies outside the nations' ability to control and regulate the media contents. But which are the reasons for the slow development of media literacy initiatives?

### **Parents**

A common argument, not least among commercial media, is that it is the parents' responsibility to take care of and teach their children about the media.

Research gives evidence that parents can be of great importance in this regard. The parents' own media use is often an example that makes a lasting impression on how their children use – and in the future will use – media. And children who have good relations to their parents, peers, other adults and the school are more seldom influenced by media contents in undesirable ways than children who live in tangled social environments.

Parents can also mediate children's media use with the aim of reinforcing desirable and counteracting undesirable influences of media contents by 1) using media together with their children (co-using), 2) talking about media contents with their child (active mediation), and 3) setting rules in relation to the child's media use (restrictive mediation). Research on only 'restrictive mediation' (setting rules) and only 'co-using' the media has produced somewhat inconsistent findings, whereas 'active mediation' (talking about the media and their contents) seems successful in a variety of domains (Nathanson & Cantor 2000).

On the other hand, many research studies also conclude that parents are not especially well informed about their children's media use, and that communication between children and parents about media use and contents many times is lacking (e.g., the Eurobarometer 'Safer Internet' 2006). Other findings show that parents often overestimate their own engagement in children's media use (e.g., Larsson 2004), as well as their children's satisfaction with talking with them about the media (e.g., Casas, González & Figuer 2004).

Furthermore, in media-saturated countries there are nowadays often many television sets and computers in the home, and great proportions of children and young people also have such

equipment in their own room. This means that the conditions of using media together, talking about media contents, and setting rules have radically changed – joint media use in these countries is becoming less common.

There are also always a great many parents who do not have time to engage in their children's media use, who do not know about or how to handle possible filtering methods, who are not media literate themselves, who do not care since they are in entangled situations but instead rely on media as sitter-ins, or who do not think of extensive media use or certain media contents as anything to be concerned about.

The conclusion is that relying solely on parents' responsibility is not an effective regulatory or media literacy strategy (a conclusion also drawn by others, e.g., Livingstone, Van Couvering & Thumim 2005).

However, this conclusion does not contradict the fact that parents need information and support to be able to better interact with their children in relation to the media. Different awareness-raising efforts for parents are highly relevant – both in order to increase their own media literacy as adults and to make them realise the importance of their own role in helping children to become more competent and critical media users.

### **Media educators**

All over the world, different kinds of public, private and voluntary organisations and networks are offering advice to children, parents, teachers/media educators, librarians and others about how especially children and young people shall behave in relation to the media in general, and in particular, how they shall behave safely on the Internet – while at the same time getting most out of the medium. A few (of an abundance of) examples of organisations offering such advice are the European Union, the Council of Europe, NetAlert (Australia), The Media Awareness Network (Canada), and UNESCO (see, e.g. *Media Education Kit for Teachers, Students, Parents and Professionals*, Frau-Meigs 2006). There is also user-generated material on media literacy, for example, on YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)). (For further examples, see Carlsson & von Feilitzen 2006).

As mentioned previously, media literacy is often facilitated by children's and young people's own media production, especially if it emanates from their pleasure and motivation. Lessons about how to produce media content are offered on the internet, as well – making a short film, setting up a website, etc. In addition, there are several school networks where classes exchange experience online or send 'video letters' to other classes. Moreover, there are quite a number of festivals and awards for short films, videos and websites made by children and young people.

Even if these awareness-raising and other methods certainly are contributing to media literacy, they are not sufficient. We therefore have to turn to the personal role of teachers and media educators in and outside school. There are, however, many factors preventing media educators' education. Even if the factors differ between countries and regions in the world, some recurrent ones are the following:

In many countries, media literacy education lacks genuine political will and support, on the national or local level. Media education on the grassroots level has to be supported, be integrated into a general media policy. Solitary fiery spirits may at last be burnt out.

Training of teachers in media education is often lacking, or, if it exists, is almost always implemented as an optional area in teacher training colleges and not as a compulsory element. This is related to the fact that in most countries, where media education is supposed to be taught in school, it is not a subject of its own but shall, according to the curricula, be integrated in other disciplines. Moreover media literacy for young people is almost solely implemented in secondary education, although it would be at least as pertinent to younger children.

One consequence for media educators is, mostly, low status of and no one really being responsible for the subject (in contrast to the often high status of the more technical learning how to handle computers and the internet.) Other consequences are lack of teaching resources and difficulties in formulating and assessing goals for media education.

This might be further complicated by the kind of education system, which is different in different countries, sometimes being centralised, sometimes decentralised; sometimes public, sometimes private; sometimes controlled, sometimes not.



If looking upon media education as something limited to school, we must also remember that some children in the world never attend school and of those who do, many do not reach grade five, and many more never go to secondary school.

In several countries media literacy projects are, actually, happening outside school, often led by voluntary organisations and/or in the forms of local youth and community-based projects. When talking about media literacy globally, it is therefore, as hinted at, necessary to widen the scope and include all kinds of non-formal contexts, as well.

Furthermore, school teachers – or other media educators – often lack interdisciplinary, national and international networks, which facilitate conferences and newsletters providing input from various directions, i.e., tips about new pedagogic methods, books, audio-visual material, and so on. To be prosperous, media education also has to be based on a continuous co-operation with groups other than teachers, for example, parents, researchers, media practitioners and viewer action groups, something that seldom is the case. Moreover, teachers/media educators themselves often belong to the ‘middle class’, implying that they are striving for other kinds of symbolic capital than those conveyed by popular media, which most of their students use.

There is also a strong claim for more research, evaluations and assessments. Even if a few research studies show that students have learnt what they have been taught, there are other studies indicating that certain kinds of media education can be problematic (Ai-Leen 1999, de Block et al., 2004). Most often there is no research at all. And we know very little about the long-term consequences of media literacy education. Are they lasting? Is the level of media literacy generally raised?

All these – and other – hindering factors often contribute to confusion on part of the teachers and media educators, and, consequently, to a pedagogy of media education that rests on obscure grounds.

The conclusion is that if media literacy shall be realised and successful in and outside school, teachers’ and other adults’ training must be implemented and improved, and school leaders’

and politicians' awareness of the need for media education must be raised. Media literacy for media educators is of utmost concern.

### **Media literacy for media professionals**

Increased participation in the media by children and young people may – besides counteracting the clear underrepresentation of children in the media contents – contribute to realising children's right to freedom of expression and children's right to participate in media and society (the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989). At the same time, children will – at least to some extent – be protected against offensive and potentially harmful media contents, since they through their media participation will develop a critical thinking towards the media.

But media literacy may be hampered by the media themselves. This can manifest itself in, for instance, difficulties in copying and clearing copyrights of audio-visual material for educational use – especially if the goals of media education are to teach students and ordinary people critical media thinking and democratic participation. It can also be difficult to persuade the established media to broadcast successful programmes made by ordinary children, young people and adults. The media may argue that such programmes do not fit into the schedule, or that the ordinary audience lacks interest in programmes made by non-professionals.

Interestingly is, however, the fact that when audiences power on the internet grow to strong, media companies step in to control the economic profits. For example, media have bought popular communities on the internet where users themselves produce material, such as MySpace with 106 million users and now owned by the media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News-Corporation, and the website YouTube, one of the fastest growing websites of all, which recently was bought by the U.S. internet company Google.

Media professionals are, naturally, in many ways 'media literate'. On the other hand, much research all over the world continuously finds that media contents often underrepresent and give biased pictures of population groups (children, women, ethnic and linguistic minority groups, etc.) and of entire populations and nations. There are also in many media other offensive and potentially harmful contents, such as representations of physical violence,

pornography, racism, and increasingly excessive marketing. The same and other kinds of risks are found on the internet.

Most media have produced ethical guidelines for their self-regulation. There are also several initiatives trying to increase media professionals' awareness about how to report on children and young people. The International Federation of Journalists has, e.g., published a booklet *Putting Children in the Right. Guidelines for Journalists and Media Professionals* (2002). The booklet includes guidelines for reporting on children; recommendations for raising awareness of child rights; awareness training for media professionals; a section on interviewing, photographing and filming children; and much more.

Another booklet, *The Media and Children's Rights. A resource for journalists by journalists* (1999/2005) was written by MediaWise Trust to assist media professionals and others to consider how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child might impact upon the way children are represented in and by the media.

Still another means to raise media professionals' awareness about young people's relations to the media is seminars and conferences, of which the international and regional ones have multiplied since the early 1990s. Many of these meetings have resulted in declarations, resolutions and charters on how to ameliorate children's and young people's media environment, which have been distributed to media professionals and others all over the world.

Other initiatives are watch groups, monitoring among other things, media's representation of children, such as The Media Monitoring Project, South Africa ([www.mediamonitoring.org.za](http://www.mediamonitoring.org.za)), ANDI – Agência de Notícias dos Direitos da Infância, Brazil and other Latin American countries ([www.andi.org.br](http://www.andi.org.br) & [www.redandi.org](http://www.redandi.org)) and Hatemalo Sanchar, Nepal ([www.hatemalo.org](http://www.hatemalo.org)).

In several countries, there are also ratings of the contents to inform the audiences. Sometimes these are controlled by an independent group established by the media industry itself, sometimes by other entities.

Nevertheless, there are – in general – no signs of more balanced media contents within the explosive media flow as a whole, especially not as regards satellite television, commercial films and the newer digital media. On the contrary, research studies over time often find the same or more representations of offensive and potentially harmful media contents.

Reasons for this situation are many. Examples are ignorance or lack of ethics among certain media professionals, as well as stressing production conditions – but to a greater extent the reasons are the ideology and societal culture in which the media work as well as the media's policy and economy. The absolute majority of media live on advertising and on the necessity of good relations with most other lines of business in the market. A whopping three quarters of global spending on advertising ends up in the pockets of a mere 20 media conglomerates (McChesney 2002). Besides advertising, the media companies are themselves often interwoven with and anchored to other branches of the industry (food, cars, weapon, etc.). The strive for economic profit among most mainstream media in a more and more competitive and globalised media landscape supported by the rapid development of information technology means that the observance of codes of conducts and ethical guidelines often comes in the second place or is thrown into the shade.

Combating the root of media's offensive and potentially harmful contents must therefore primarily mean analysing and changing the relations of the prevailing media globalisation process to economy and market forces, politics, technological development, dominance/dependence between rich/poor countries and people, cultural identity and human/children's rights.

Increased awareness among media professionals and policy-makers of the need for such change is therefore highly essential. The media's often aggressive defence of their own freedom of expression must be refuted with the argument that freedom of expression and the right to communicate are valid for children and for all. It is reasonable to say that although media professionals and policy-makers in one way are 'media literate', they are on another plane the groups in society most in need of media literacy.

Cees J. Hamelink's (2002) conclusion is that the prevailing process of media globalisation – the neo-liberal market-centred globalisation-from-above – hampers implementation of children's information rights expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Hamelink points to the need of a different humanitarian form of globalisation – globalisation-from-below that is people-centred and prefers the protection of basic human rights to trading interests. Fundamental to the implementation and protection of human rights is an environment of empowerment. This is equally important for grown-ups and minors and maybe even more crucial for the latter as there is in most cultures a strong tendency to silence them and spend more energy on filtering messages for them rather than on producing materials specifically suited for them. Implementation of a humanitarian agenda is urgent, he says, since the current globalisation process of the media contributes to limiting people's free space for expression and thought, violating their privacy, and undermining their citizenship by perceiving them primarily as consumers.

It might be that a special media social responsibility index, built on children's voices, could give media companies and their stakeholders an understanding that the signing of such an index would be a significant advantage in the global market in all stages of the value chain. Such a social responsibility index would both contribute to positive media images and brands, and to increased public confidence in the companies. Responsible corporate citizenship is part of the solution to the challenges of globalisation and contributing to a more sustainable and inclusive global economy and development. Requirements are, of course, that the social responsibility index must be useful both for the media and their stakeholders and give them goodwill in the eyes of children, young people, adults, and other important actors in the arena (Merlo Flores & von Feilitzen 2007).

If the mainstream commercial media reject the many possibilities to gain media literacy, the process of gaining media literacy and empowerment must build on definitions that to a lesser degree emphasise the individual's independence and media criticism and to a greater extent stress a collective societal process for change, i.e., that all individuals and groups must gain, or demand, access to media in terms production. In the medialised societies of today democracy – access to power and possibilities for social change – must mean that all shall

have access to, understand, participate, produce contents and express themselves (not only on the internet) but in all kinds of media.

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