A Comparative study of EU Documents on Media Literacy

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Abstract

For many years, Media Literacy was mainly the realm of educators and only much later did it became a matter of interest for policy makers. UNESCO has been involved with the subject area since the 1980s while the European Union started to take an active interest since the Lisbon Summit of 2000.This study compares the main documents of the Council, the Commission and Parliament, which include a Parliamentary resolution, a Recommendation, a Communication and a Directive. The paper analyses differences and similarities in these documents and critically assesses them in the light of academic literature. It compares them, where appropriate, with the two UNESCO documents i.e. Grunwald Declaration and UNESCO Paris Agenda, that are referred to in the EU documents. The paper will also explore possible implications of these policy positions for the future of Media Literacy.

Keywords: EU documents; Media Literacy, UNESCO, policy

Introduction

Tradional literacy is no longer sufficient in the digital era. This is a statement made by Commissioner Vivianne Reding in a press release announcing the publication of the Commission's Communication (2007) on Media Literacy. She is quoted as saying that today everyone, old and young, needs a greater awareness of how to express themselves effectively, and how to interpret what others are saying, especially on blogs, via search engines or in advertising. She also says that Media Literacy is crucial for achieving full and active citizenship and is more important than regulation. This statement sheds light on the EU's relatively recent interest in Media Literacy as an important response to the new socio-cultural and economic environment created by the electronic and the new media, refered to by Reding as the digital era. It also reflects a number of EU's core policy positions including its policy against regulation by the state and in favour of self-regulation; emphasis on citizenship; and the policy that Media Literacy transcends both age and schooling as it is a life-long process.

This study explores some of these themes while critically analysing and comparing the key documents on Media Literacy published by the Council, the Commission and the Parliament of the European Union. It also compares these documents to the Grunwald Declaration (1982) and the Paris Agenda (2007), the two UNESCO documents referred to in EU documents. The documents of the Committee of Regions and the experts' reports commissioned by the Commission are not analysed in this paper, though, where appropriate, reference is made to some of them.

An economically driven strategy

During the last forty years media policies were marked by a paradigm shift towards deregulation and privatization on the national level. Technological convergence, mainly resulting from digitalization and computerization, together with media concentration in a globalized environment, increased the importance of internationally co-ordinated media policies. However their domain is the technical, administrative and economic level and for this reason the International Telecommunications Union, the World Trade Organisation and the World Intellectual Property Organisation are active in the area. On the other hand attempts at establishing international policies on media content have met with very little success though as McQuail (2010) notes "the development of the Internet has stimulated call for international regulation" (p. 368).

Two particular developments have attracted the attention of media policy makers on Media Education. One development was the challenge for local and national cultures posed by globalization (Hamelink, 1983) and the need to educate users to face these challenges. The other was the realization of the economic value of media education policies. These two developments influenced the stance taken by policy makers on Media Education mainly on the national and regional levels. Frau-Meigs and Torrent (2009) map these policies in several parts of the world. This paper studies these developments within the EU.

The EU's direct involvement with Media Literacy dates to the Lisbon Agenda (2000). This document aims to make the EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (Para 5). According to Zacchetti (2008), Media Literacy, for the EU, was mainly a means to achieve this aim and the Commission, to put this into practice, has since then taken specific initiatives in the field of Media Literacy and has integrated Media Literacy aspects into a number of its existing programmes. The Commission's Communication (December 2007), Parliament's Resolution (2008), the Commission's Recommendation (2009) and the Council's Conclusion (2008), among other documents, state that Media Literacy significantly contributes towards the objectives of Lisbon Agenda.

> "A higher degree of Media Literacy … is particularly important for the establishment of a more competitive and inclusive knowledge economy through boosting competitiveness in the ICT and media sectors, for the completion of a Single European Information Space and for the fostering of inclusion, better public services and quality of life."
>
> Commission's Communication, (2007: Para 1)

This position is reinforced by the Council's Conclusions (2008) which recognise the importance of Media Literacy and its role to promote the citizens' active participation in the economic life of society (Para 3). The contents and the very title of the Commission's Recommendation (2009),

Media Literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society, provides further evidence. The influence on the economic potential of Media Literacy is in sharp contrast to the education priority given in UNESCO's documents e.g. the Grunwald Declaration (1982) and the Paris Agenda (2007).

The Lisbon Agenda (2000) does not directly mention Media Literacy but instead refers to Digital Literacy which it considers to be a basic skill (Para 26). Buckingham (2009) argues that Digital Literacy is frequently defined as a 'life skill'– a form of individual technological competence that is a prerequisite for full participation in society. He points out that such a skill is also essentially functional or operational, that is 'how-to' skill (2009: 17). According to many researchers, for example, Zacchetti, the lack of this life skill would lead to the digital divide (2003) which has serious economic and socio-cultural consequences.

Digital Literacy is different from Media Literacy. It is not just a skill, but as Buckingham points out it is 'also about critical thinking, and about cultural dispositions or tastes. … It is about old media and new media, about books and mobile phones. It is for young and old, teachers and parents … It is about creativity, citizenship, empowerment, inclusion, personalisation, innovation, critical thinking ….' (2009: 15). Zacchetti argues that in Media Literacy, for example, information is accessed to determine its truthfulness, deception, bias and prejudice (2003). Digital Literacy, on the other hand is more about the new media and the Internet so much so that the Lisbon Agenda (2000)

frequently refers to the Internet but not to television, radio or newspapers. The Lisbon Agenda (2000) uses the term Digital Literacy. It asks member states to ensure that all schools have access to the Internet by the end of 2001, and that all teachers are skilled in the use of the Internet and multimedia resources by the end of 2002. Buckingham (2009) argues that this preference for Digital Literacy is complimented by support from the industry which sees the great commercial potential that results from more people skilled in the use of the new media.

Use of "Media Literacy" and "Media Education"

Several terms are used to describe the information, skills and attitudes needed to manage the expanding media environment. Above, this paper has already referred to Digital Literacy and Media Literacy in different documents of the EU. The Commission's Communication (December, 2007) refers to Image Education and Film while EU documents also refer to Media Education. This multiple use of terms does not help achieve clarity in the discussion of the basic concepts.

Media Education and Media Literacy are the two terms mostly used in EU documents. Academic literature distinguishes between the different meanings of these terms. Perez Tornero says that Media Literacy describes 'the skills and abilities required for conscious, independent development in the new communication environment – digital, global, and multimedia – of the information society' (2008: 103). For him Media Literacy is the outcome of the media-education process (2008). For Buckingham (2003) Media Education is

the teaching and learning about the media; while Media Literacy is the knowledge and skills learners acquire.

Zacchetti, an officer of the Commission, in a personal communication, says that even the Commission considers Media Education as a process which leads to Media Literacy. This distinction, however, is not always reflected in EU documents and sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. In the documents of the Commission and the Council, the term Media Literacy is used profusely while the term Media Education is never used in the main text. It is only used in footnote 3 of the Commission's Communication (2007)... On the other hand, Parliament, in its resolution of 2008, approving the Prets Report (2008) refers to both Media Education and Media Literacy. There are instances where the distinction is clear for example 'Media Education is considered essential to achieving a high level of Media Literacy' (Para I). However this is not always the case and in Para 13 the terms are used interchangeably.

A linguistic reason may underpin the different usage of 'education' and 'literacy'. As there is no satisfactory translation of the word 'literacy' in French, this language uses the word 'education' where the English version of the documents uses 'literacy'. Bazalgette (2009) suggests that for these reasons it is better to stick to the term Media Education . This term should also be used to have consistency with the Grunwald Declaration (1982) and the Paris Agenda (2007) which frequently use Media Education but never the term Media Literacy.

The EU's definition of Media Literacy

Academic literature, for the past two or three decades, has produced an enormous diversity of definitions of Media Literacy as has been pointed out by, amongst others, Rosembaum et al. (2008: 314). Von Felitzen and Carlsson (2003:12) claim that probably this is because 'this concept has different meanings in different countries and cultures'. Among those who gave definitions or discussed definitions made by others, one can refer to Masterman (1985); Bazalgette et al. (1992); Thoman (1999); Potter (2004); Livingstone et al. (2005); Frau Meigs (2006) and Federov (2008). The definition adopted by the different institutions of the EU includes the three characteristics which are increasingly being used to define Media Education: access, critical evaluation and creation of media products.

A study carried out for the Commission by the Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona (2007) concluded that a lack of shared vision between member states was among the difficulties for the development of Media Literacy on an EU level. The Council's Conclusions (2009) accept that Media Literacy is a dynamic and evolving concept and that common understanding of the concept is affected by cultural, technological, industrial and generational differences. Notwithstanding these factors which militate against a common pan-European definition, the EU succeeded to come up with a definition of Media Literacy which is basically common to all its institutions.

Media Literacy is generally defined as the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts. *(*Commission's Communication, 2007 *Para 2*)

The substantially common definition given by the three EU institutions   is also the result of the public consultation which the Commission launched in October 2006. Many proposed that the ability of critical evaluation and the ability to create and communicate should be part of the definition. The Report on the Results of the Public Consultation (2007) quotes Livingstone together with Millwood Hargrave stressing the importance of critical literacy as part of the definition of Media Literacy as this helps one to distinguish 'the honest from the deceptive, the public interest from commercial persuasion, the objective and trustworthy from the biased or partisan.' (2007: 6).

The proposal to consider the ability to create basic media productions as part of the definition is also well backed by academic literature. Kirwan et al. (2003) consider as part of Media Literacy 'the ability to write media texts, increasingly using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) such as desktop publishing, authoring multimedia packages, video filming, photography and digital editing' (2003:5). Buckingham argues that 'practical, hands-on use of media technology frequently offers the most direct, engaging and effective way of exploring a given topic. It is also the aspect of Media Education that is most likely to generate enthusiasm from students' (2003:82).

Several documents, building on the Commission's definition which includes both critical thinking and production, outline what should be included in Media Literacy programmes. The elements proposed in the Council's Conclusions (2008) build on the belief that Media Literacy is important in the development of democratic and cultural life of society and that it is central to political culture and active participation by Union citizens (2008, Para A). Parliament's Resolution (2008) considers Media Literacy as an important part of political education and consumer information while stating that it should include awareness of and familiarity with matters relating to intellectual rights, the mobilisation and democratic participation of citizens and the promotion of intercultural dialogue. According to the Commission's Communication (2007) Media Literacy programmes should include awareness of copyright issues, a critical approach to quality and accuracy of content and an understanding of the economy of media and the difference between pluralism and media ownership. In its Recommendation (2009), the Commission adds the enhancement of the awareness of the European AV heritage and cultural identities. Internet training aimed at children from a very early age, including sessions open to parents on possible risks of the Internet, is mentioned in Parliament's and Council's Recommendation (2006).

The above shows that the term Media Literacy is generally used by EU institutions to include also the characteristics attributed to Media Education. This is particularly evidenced in the Audio Visual Media Services Directive (AVMS Directive 2007) which states that Media Literacy is not just about skills

but also about knowledge and understanding which make it possible for audiences to use media effectively and safely. 'Media-literate people will be able to exercise informed choices, understand the nature of content and services and take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies' (Recital 26a).

Empowerment or inoculation?

Different EU documents refer to the need of protection in view of the risks incurred in some media usage and the harm that can possibly result, especially to minors. The protection of minors is treated at length in the Recommendation of the EU Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006. References to risk and harm are mainly made in the context of the new media especially the Internet. Faced by the real possibility of harmful content in some media products, especially for children, the EU recommends a battery of initiatives including legislative initiatives on the EU level, regulation on the national level, codes of self-regulation and Media Literacy.

One can legitimately ask whether the EU's attitude to the media reflects the inoculation approach so popular until the 1960s and which, according to Buckingham (2001), had a resurgence in the 1990s because of the increased importance of the new media. However, it can be argued that while the Inoculation Model sought to protect people preferably by persuading them not to use the media, EU documents state that Media Literacy should empower people to protect themselves. The Commission's Communication (2007) states that the Safer Internet Plus programme aims at empowering parents,

teachers and children. Moreover, the AVMS Directive (2007) claims that Media-literate people will be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material (Recital 26a). Council notes that references to risk should be carried out in the context of Media Literacy policies putting forward a generally positive message (Council's Conclusions, 2009).

Buckingham (2009) and Livingstone (2004), argue that these references to the empowerment of the individual reflects the transfer of responsibility from states to individuals in line with a neo-liberal strategy which is however presented as a democratic move. In a de-regulated market economy such that espoused by the EU, the responsibility to protect people from the negative effects of market forces, according to Buckingham, is shifted from government on to consumers that is from public regulation to self-regulation as we can see in many other areas of modern social policy' (2009: 16). O'Neill and Barnes claim that several commentators treat this concept of 'empowering the user' with scepticism as it is seen as an unfair burden which 'leaves individuals vulnerable to much more powerful forces, and without essential measures to guarantee and protect their rights'' (2008: 54). This is part of the paradigm shift that we have seen in media policies.

Media Literacy in formal and non-formal education

The strategy adopted by the EU considers Media Literacy as a life-long process encompassing all citizens and involving many stakeholders. Council's Conclusions (2009), point out that formal, informal and non-formal

education plays an important role in the development of both Media Literacy and creativity for all people in society. Parliament's Resolution (2008) 'maintains that Media Education activities have to encompass all citizens – children, young people, adults, older people, and people with disabilities' (Para 11). This is a life long process as it 'begins in the home with learning how to select from the media services available… and continues at school and during lifelong learning' with the contribution of many stakeholders extending from national, governmental and regulatory authorities to the work of media professionals and institutions (Para 12).

According to the AVMS directive (2007), it is the primary responsibility of national authorities to include Media Literacy in school curricula at all levels. The place that it should have in these schools is, according to Buckingham (2003), the subject of a controversy that is alive today as it was twenty years ago. Masterman (1985) said that Media Literacy can be a subject on its own, be integrated with other subjects or it can be studied in some depth as, for example, part of social studies, or language and communication courses. On the other hand, Buckingham (2003) discussed the possibility of Media Literacy as part of various subjects particularly highlighting, language, literature and ICTs. Frau-Meigs claims that the tendency which advocated Media Education across the curriculum tended to adopt the attitude that an 'issue that is every teachers' responsibility can quickly become nobody's responsibility' (2006:13).

Different EU institutions take different sides in this debate. Parliament recommends in its Resolution (2008) that the way forward lies both 'in the creation of a specific subject – Media Education – as well as an interdisciplinary approach combined with out-of-school subjects' (Para 20). The Commission's Recommendation (2009), on the other hand, does not take a clear stand suggesting an open debate on the inclusion of Media Literacy in the compulsory education curriculum and as part of the provision of key competencies for lifelong learning.

In line with its holistic approach, the EU widens the spectrum of stakeholders that are expected to promote Media Literacy. The importance of parents (Parliament's Resolution, 2008,) and teachers (Commission's Recommendation, 2009) is perhaps the most obvious to point out. Both the Commission's Recommendation (2009) and the Council's conclusions (2009) highlight also the important role that civil society is expected to have in the promotion of Media Literacy (Commission's Recommendation, 2009). Media industries are expected to play a crucial role (Council's Conclusions, 2009). The Commission's Communication (2009) expects industry, among other things, to provide people with user-friendly information; make people aware of different forms of advertising; spread information about the production and editing of creative content and provide information packs especially for young people. This direction is in line with current media policies emphasise the role of all non-governmental institutions while downplaying the role of the state and regulatory institutions.

Some implications for the future of Media Literacy in the EU

This paper points towards the implications of the EU policies for the future of Media Literacy as well as points towards the difference that media education policies should make for media policies in general.

The EU policy documents on Media Literacy are bound to influence the future development of media policy in Member States in at least three ways. Media Literacy will now be given more importance in formal and non-formal educational programmes. The content of these programmes will probably now give more prominence to Digital Literacy and the new media. There will be greater emphasis on teacher training.

The interest of the EU in Media Literacy should undoubtedly increase the importance of the subject in member states especially since the EU has been escalating the authority of its documents which now even include a Directive. This increases the pressure on member states to register progress. Specific recommendations and/or requests are made in the documents. Parliament's Resolution (2008) proposed that Media Literacy be made the ninth key competence for lifelong learning while the AVMS Directive (2007) asked for monitoring and reporting of progress in member states (2007: Art 26).

Will this lead to a pan-EU policy and practice for Media Literacy? During the EU Parliamentary discussions of the Prets Report (2008) on Media Literacy in a digital world, a number of MEPs expressed concern that the report violates the principle of subsidiarity. They emphasised that the design of curricula of

Media Literacy should be the responsibility of Member States as they do not consider as desireable a common European Media Education programme for all children in member states.

Content of Media Literacy programmes is another area that will be influenced. While, the Commission has publicly stated that 'the modalities of Media Literacy in school curricula are Member States' primary responsibility (Commission's Recommendation, 2009) it is probable that besides the increased importance that will be given to the subject, there will also be an influence on the content of the Media Literacy programmes. More emphasis will be given to Digital Literacy since the EU's interest lies mainly in the economic import of the media, particularly ICTs and the new media especially the Internet. Even paragraph 2 of the Commission's Communication (2007) which refers to 'all media'' gives more importance to the new media. The Lisbon Agenda (2000); Parliament's Resolution (2008) and the Recommendation of Parliament and Council (2006) have more references to the new media than to traditional media. The Lisbon Agenda (2000), furthermore, set 2002 as the date by which all teachers should be skilled in the use of the Internet however, there is no target date specifying when teachers should be literate in other media. It is now up to educators to yield the educational benefits that can arise by the convergence of programmes of Media Literacy with programmes of digital literacy.

The third area of influence that can be exerted by the EU documents is teacher training. In the last twenty-five years teacher training has been

considered as essential for the success of Media Literacy programmes (Grunwald,1982; Paris Agenda, 2007). This notwithstanding teacher training is still not adequate in several EU member states (Lauri et al. 2010). Parliament's Resolution (2008) recommends that compulsory Media Education modules be incorporated into teacher training for all school levels and that teachers of all subjects and at every type of school should be familiarised with the issues related Media Education. This emphasis on teacher training in EU policy documents could lead to improvement in an area that is essential for the proper teaching of the subject.

Concluding remark

While in media policies on the international level there is a hiatus between the content dimension and the technical, administrative and economic dimensions, the EU's adoption of a media education policy shows that such a hiatus is neither necessary nor desirable especially in is a culture marked by media convergence and globalization. Such a culture brings with it the need to adopt convergent media policies on the international level whereby the content aspects are catered for together with the economic, administrative and technical aspects. Furthermore research on media policies has to be inspired by a holistic ethos. The aspects just mentioned are weaved together and have to be studies and reflected upon simultaneously. Such an attitude leads to digital dynamics rather than digital divided (Frau-Meigs & Torrent, 2009). Only a collective effort by the different stakeholders can create the required impetus to ascertain that the citizens of the digital era will be media

literate enough to become full and active citizens as well as empowered media users.

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