MEDIA LITERACY: CONCEPTS, APPROACHES AND COMPETENCIES

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Abstract: Media Literacy (ML) focuses on educating different categories of public (children, young people and adults), in both formal and informal settings, to critically and consciously consume mediated messages. It encompasses various skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, autonomy, communication and participation. Although ML is far from being a unified field, there are a number of concepts, approaches and competencies that tend to share a common ground. In addition, despite the fact that there is a vigorous development of ML initiatives worldwide, in Romania the critical deconstruction of media messages is only scarcely present, within narrow niches.

Keywords: Media Literacy, media studies, discourse analysis, semiotics

1. Introduction

Living in a media-saturated world requires a constellation of skills – critical resources for users to cope with and to process media messages, produced and distributed via traditional and new channels alike (Cernicova 2013, 75). Media Literacy (ML) is a field and a movement that promotes and facilitates critical thinking skills oriented toward media messages. It has evolved from a variety of disciplines, having at its core media and cultural studies and semiotics. ML is a fractured field: many competing frameworks and visions, different schools and factions, antagonistic discourses and practices, unresolved and ongoing debates. As ML builds on different underlying theories and even if there is no consensus on what media literacy exactly is, there have emerged several key concepts. It promotes awareness and mindfulness, enhanced discernment concerning media consumption, and critical abilities for analyzing media messages. ML provides tools for interpreting, analyzing, understanding, and challenging media discourses. All media messages are representations, and so they are inherently ideological and biased. In addition, all media messages have financial and symbolic stakes. ML is multi-dimensional and comprises a set of developmental, progressive skills.

Media messages have the potential to exert both positive and negative effects on consumers. ML aims to create active, competent users of media messages. The fundamental principle of ML is the process of inquiry – the habit of questioning media messages on a systematic basis. "A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities." (Kellner 1995, 1). In this media environment, the boundaries between news and entertainment, on the one hand, and between news and propaganda, one the other hand, are increasingly blurred. Consequently, the ability of decoding media messages is crucial for the modern man.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the extreme diversity of ML visions in detail. The main intention is to highlight the points of agreement. Various definitions

of ML have been proposed. Thus, Potter (2013, 22-3) defines ML as: "a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter". The British independent regulator Ofcom defines ML as "the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts". Similarly, the Aspen Institute offers a brief definition of ML as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms". Finally, I would propose a working definition: ML is a set of integrated skills which enable users to actively access, analyze, interpret and question media messages.

2. Media Literacy at the International, European and Romanian levels

In Romania, there is little concern in developing ML skills at the state level, and, consequently, only incipient, mostly private initiatives exist at this point in time. The present media education policy focuses on computer and information literacy as compulsory discipline. In our country, formal and informal media education is scarcely available, mainly for high school students (a project lead by the Center for Independent Journalism) even less for younger students (a program lead by ActiveWatch) and virtually not at all for adult training, according to the report Charting Media and Learning in Europe – 2011 and 2013, issued by MEDEAnet – a project managed by European Commission and having the NGO ActiveWatch as partners from Romania. In addition, starting from 2004, critical skills for media consumption have become a separate optional subject for high school education, as the result of the advocacy of ActiveWatch. The academic interest in media education at university level is sporadic, as well. At present, a long-term policy strategy to promote media literacy within school education or initial and lifelong learning does not exist in Romania. There is only one organization (NGO) dedicated to promote ML – MediaWise Society, launched in 2014.

At the international level, UNESCO has a robust experience in enhancing media literacy, founding the Grünwald Declaration of 1982 which recognizes the need for political and educational systems to promote citizens' critical understanding of mediated communication. The Grünwald Declaration was reaffirmed at the international level by experts (information, communication and media), education policy-makers, teachers and researchers, NGO representatives and media professionals from all the regions of the world who met in Paris, in 2007. The deliberations of this two-day meeting gave birth to the UNESCO Paris Agenda - Twelve Recommendations for Media Education (Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

UNESCO uses a composite concept, linking media literacy and information literacy, and employs accordingly the term Media and Information Literacy (MIL). The Organization has since supported various initiatives to engender MIL as an engaging civic education movement and a tool for lifelong learning.

The European Charter for Media Literacy aims to foster greater clarity and wider consensus in Europe on media literacy and media education; to raise the public profile of media literacy and media education in each European nation, and in Europe as a whole and to encourage the development of a permanent and voluntary network of media educators in Europe, bound together by their common aims, and enabled by their institutional commitment. Three strands of cultural, critical and creative media education can be mapped on to seven competencies of ML:

- Use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual and community needs and interests;

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- Gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources;
- Understand how and why media content is produced;
- Analyze critically the techniques, languages and conventions used by the media, and the messages they convey;
- Use media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions;
- Identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful;
- Make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities.

At the EU level, there is a sustained preoccupation for promoting and developing media education. However, here are still many hindrances to the development of ML at European level. Member States still lack a shared vision in this area. In addition, the lack of visibility of national, regional and local initiatives in this area makes it more difficult to foster European networks. Consequently, for the moment, there is no coordination between stakeholders. On August the 20th 2009, the European Commission adopted a recommendation (2009/625/EC), in which encourages the Member States, among other things, to initiate "open a debate in conferences and other public events on the inclusion of media literacy in the compulsory education curriculum, and as part of the provision of key competences for lifelong learning" and, also, to increase "commitment to provide with the necessary tools" to improve the level of media literacy. The European Commission intends to further create consensus on essential aspects of media literacy (definitions, objectives) and support the analysis and exchange of good practices.

The first European congress on Media Literacy, organized by EuroMeduc, was held in 2004, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, followed by a second one, in 2009, in Bellaria, Italy.

Another European project (EMEDUS) aims to provide policy recommendations at both European and national levels to support educational policies development in the field of lifelong media education. Exploring the conceptual frameworks of media literacy education across the Member States, the project aims to advance media literacy education in lifelong learning in formal and non-formal education in Europe. The first European Media and Information Literacy Forum have been held from 27 to 28 May 2014 at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. This conference was co-organized by UNESCO, the European Commission, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and other partners.

3. Approaches, Elements, and Skills of Media Literacy

There are mainly three approaches of ML: protectionist, promoting, and participatory (Pérez Tornero and Varis 2010, 40-2).

The protectionist approach aims at protecting vulnerable users against potential threats of the media messages. Protectionist regulations are frequently associated with children and youth, who are the most vulnerable to the potentially harmful effects of the media due to their age and education. However, these regulations can also concern sexual, xenophobic and racist content. Protectionist ML seems to assume that all users

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process media messages the same way, and therefore require the same antidotes to negative media influences. This approach has been criticized for being both paternalistic and clueless.

The promoting orientation consists of encouraging activities that tend to stimulate greater awareness of the media environment. This approach is based on the conviction that the media offer all users opportunities and potentialities. Therefore, it is less defensive than the protectionist orientation and stresses the constructive aspect of the relationship with the media through either intellectual creativity or communication relations.

Finally, the participatory orientation stresses the development of social production and communication for the enhancement of knowledge, interactivity and dialogue. This attitude upholds individuals' autonomy, critical capacity and ability to properly guide their own personal development. The Internet and the web facilitates on the highest level the sharing of resources and social interactivity.

These orientations might appear mutually incompatible. However, these orientations can be integrated systematically. Despite the existing differences, all three coexist and are complementary in many ML programs.

Media scholars (Baran 2014, 21-4) identify eight fundamental elements of media literacy:

1. A critical thinking skill enabling audience members to develop independent judgments about media content. Thinking critically about the content users consume is the very essence of media literacy. Media consumers must take responsibility for the outcome of their choices in content.

2. An understanding of the process of mass communication. As users comprehend how mass media operate and how its various components relate to one another, they can form expectations of how the media messages can benefit or harm them.

3. An awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society. Mass media is a change agent and it is influencing people on any levels. If users ignore the impact of media on their lives, they run the risk of being caught up and carried along by that change rather than controlling or leading it.

4. Strategies for analyzing and discussing media messages. To consume media messages thoughtfully and meaningfully, users need a foundation on which to base thought and reflection. If we, we must possess. The users can employ critical tools to interpret media messages, or the meaning can be imposed on them.

5. An understanding of media content as a text that provides insight into users' culture and lives. A culture and its figures, attitudes, values, concerns, and myths become known through communication. For modern cultures, media messages increasingly dominate this communication, shaping its understanding.

6. The ability to enjoy, understand and appreciate media content. ML does not mean refusing the media messages, or always being suspicious of harmful effects and cultural degradation. Consumers can enhance their understanding and appreciation of media texts, as well. Learning to enjoy, understand, and appreciate media content includes the ability to use multiple points of access – to approach media content from a variety of perspectives and derive from it many levels of meaning.

7. Development of effective production skills. ML makes the assumption that the effective and efficient comprehension of media content can be enhanced by production skills that enable users to create their own media messages. The online platforms, in particular, require effective production skills.

8. An understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of media practitioners. To make informed judgments about the performance of the media, users also must be aware of the competing pressures on practitioners as they do their jobs. They must understand the media official and unofficial rules of operation.

The structural elements of ML are: personal locus, knowledge structures and skills (Potter 2013, 15-22).

1. Personal locus consists of goals and drives that shape the information processing tasks, based on the need for information. The personal locus operates consciously and unconsciously. In the first mode, the users of media messages are aware of their options, they are able to control the processing of the media messages, and they can make autonomous decisions. In the automatic, unconscious mode, the user loses awareness and control. In both cases, cognitive structures are created and developed.

2. Knowledge structures are sets of information configurations, organized over time and stored in the memory of individuals. Once they are activated, cognitive structures behave as "mental maps" which orient the accessing and the processing information. The media messages contain factual and social information (discrete bits of information and accepted beliefs held by the members of a community). Knowledge structures provide the context users employ to assess incoming media messages. These structures concerning media effects, content, and organizations are involved in the level of media skills.

3. The skills are the tools that allow users to construct knowledge structures and to process media messages. There are seven essential skills: analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction. These skills are not dedicated exclusively to ML; they are general abilities that can be increasingly refined through systematic use.
   a. Analysis means splitting the message into meaningful elements.
   b. Evaluation is the use of standards to assess the content of the messages.
   c. Grouping entails the identification of similarities and differences from within a message, using a classification rule.
   d. Induction allows generalizations from a limited number of elements.
   e. Deduction makes particular cases from general principles.
   f. Synthesis means assembling various elements of a message in a new structure.
   g. Abstraction signifies summarizing the message, capturing its essential meaning.

One of the most important characteristics of ML is its evolving, incremental aspect. ML represents a continuum (Potter 2013, 24-5): every individual is more or less skilled, and each skill can be enhanced or improved continuously.

Despite many differences in their approaches to ML, many educators and advocates agree on a number of core principles (Yousman 2008, 243-4), such as the following:

1. **All media messages are constructed.** The first core principle is the foundation of all others. There are two aspects of this principle: "constructedness" and selection. Media messages do not present reality, they represent it: they are not just reflections of reality, non-problematic and transparent. The audience has usually access only to the final product, but not to the operations that have led to it and so the message becomes "normalized", taken for granted and unquestioned. The production operations are concealed to the public. Media messages are carefully designed combinations of various elements, calculated for maximum impact. They are built by professionals and organizations in order to convey particular ideas. This involves various decisions about what to include and what to exclude from the message. In the process, some elements are made more prominent, some are minimized and still others are omitted altogether. They are inherently biased, mediated versions of reality.

2. **Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules, and codes**. Each medium (newspaper, radio, TV, multimedia, online etc.) has its own technical and cultural codes, its own set of generic conventions, and its own production elements. These building blocks are selected, manipulated, and coordinated using professional editing methods for enhancing the meaning of the message. Each medium has specific strengths and limitations, so a TV newscast will convey its messages differently and affect users differently than if it appeared in a newspaper. Media messages can be appreciated for how they use the unique qualities of each medium to connect with their audience. Each format has a manifest function and one or more latent functions. The media convergence process generates hybrid formats that take advantage of the features of each medium. All media messages have a persuasive purpose, open or hidden: they try to make the members of the audience to think or to act in a definite direction.

3. **Different members of the audience interpret media messages differently**. All media messages are explicitly intended for target audiences. People use media routinely, anticipating some benefit, no matter how vaguely this can be stated. The media audience is not a passive mass, but an aggregation of active individuals. Not every member of the audience responds to media messages in the ways that the producers intend or in the same way as others do. The individual background (socio-economic status, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) plays an important role in the way people interpret messages. Different users often negotiate the meaning of media messages and do not accept the producers' version. Every individual possesses a unique cognitive structure ('mental map'), a filtering device through which he/she accesses, understands and approves or rejects the meaning of the message. Media users process messages in two ways: a mindless, uncritical, automatic mode, in which they take the message at face value; and a systematic, active, deliberate manner, in which they make use of several skills and questioning methods.

4. **Media messages contain embedded value and points of view**. Media always promote an agenda, overtly or covertly, thus defining the ways in which people define reality. Media messages operate on several levels (Silverblatt 2007, 4):

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- *text* (manifest message) is the direct, overt, explicit dimension. This is the surface level and the audience can easily identify its meaning;
- *subtext* (latent message) is the indirect, covert, implicit dimension. These messages go beneath the surface, and, consequently, escape the immediate notice of the audience. Latent messages may reinforce manifest messages or may imply completely different meanings;
- *intertext* (cumulative message) means repeated and frequent exposure over time that create new meanings, independent of any individual instance. Consistent messages appear in media messages regarding gender roles, definitions of success, and racial and cultural stereotypes. These cumulative messages are then reinforced through ample repetition in media.

Media messages, news and advertisements alike, are essentially narratives. Narratives organize the human experiences, making meaning of an otherwise chaotic and ambiguous world. Narratives enable the association of disparate elements and ordering them into a coherent structure, through plot. The narrative coherence, based on the chronological sequence and on the verisimilitude of the characters (protagonist, antagonist etc.), produces or even substitutes the logical coherence. In addition, media messages make full use of binary oppositions, a narrative device which translates any series of facts and events into a simple, zero-sum interaction. Narration recount events from a certain perspective, which privileges some values and points of views, whereas disparages or neglects others. Recognizing a perspective or point of view does not inherently implies this is anything wrong with this; only points to the conclusion that media messages are not neutral, but biased.

5. **Most media messages are organized in order to gain profit or power**. Media companies are mainly profit-oriented businesses that have commercial implications. The primary purpose of media is to generate profits. Information and entertainment are secondary considerations. In order to become and to stay economically viable, media organization must attract a sufficiently large audience to be interesting for advertisers. In addition, they strive to create in the members of the public a state of mental accessibility for the intended meanings.

Every principle corresponds to a core concept: authorship, format, audience, content, and purpose. In order to be media literate, a person needs to use these principles and concepts to actively question media messages he/she encounters. The habit of critically interrogate messages is the essence of ML. Access to information alone is not sufficient; it must be doubled with skills to analyze and interpret the messages. The reverse is also true: mere skills, without exposing oneself to a range of media messages, will limit the benefits. Access, skills and deliberate practice empower any media user to the point of becoming a sophisticated, media literate citizen and consumer.

4. Conclusions

Media not only construct our sense of reality; media represents the reality, through framing events and situations, but also through priming certain elements. Media message involve paradigmatic choices – selecting from a range of possible elements,

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and syntagmatic combinations – putting the elements together according to established conventions, rules and practices.

ML skills help users adopt a critical stance; recognize the persuasion techniques used in various media messages; employ a multi-perspectival approach of media; recognize bias, propaganda, manipulation, misinformation, and disinformation; sceptically examine the often-conflicting media messages based on user's own experiences, abilities, beliefs, and values.

Romania cannot wait until the debates and rivalries around ML will end (they will not). ML is an evolving, vibrant field and movement. In our country, there should be expected a more sustained preoccupation for a strategy in ML at the national level. On the one hand, it would be advisable the development of a national curriculum in formal media education and, on the other hand, a public and private support for ML projects and programs at national, regional and local level. The human resources (teachers and trainers) would be educated and instructed by a network of entities involved in ML. In addition, implementation of ML programs should take into account experiences at international, European and national levels (countries more advanced in ML). In the Romanian ML strategy, the focus should be placed less on protectionist approach (which could be covered through more strict and clear laws and regulations) and more on promoting and participatory orientations.

The starting point should be the adoption of the Grünwald Declaration and the Paris Agenda, focusing on: developing comprehensive media education programs at all education levels; promoting lifelong learning programs; teacher training and awareness raising of the other stakeholders in the social sphere; research and its dissemination networks; and European and international cooperation.

In the medium term, ML education can be expanded to sub-disciplines (news literacy, digital literacy, etc.), but only after a firm foundation is built. However, in a country where the plain literacy is declining sharply, it is questionable whether ML can be seen as anything more than a luxury.

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