

# CRITICAL INSIGHTS IN MEDIA LITERACY RESEARCH IN SPAIN: EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Carmen Marta-Lazo :: María del Mar Grandío Pérez

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**ABSTRACT** *This article proposes a critical perspective on the tradition of media literacy research in Spain in order to examine how Spanish scholars are facing challenges on public policy, and more specifically school curricula, regarding media education. Research in media literacy in Spain (known as educomunicación in Spanish) has moved forward through the interest of scholars and other groups, such as journalists and school teachers, who have raised awareness on the need to develop a critical and creative media learning system. This article will review a) the European and Hispanic heritages on media literacy in Spain, b) main current research groups and projects focusing on media education and c) academic policy on digital competence in formal learning. Lastly, this article will suggest some recommendations on education and policy that will help gain more support among academia, media and citizens within the European and Latin American context.*

## KEY WORDS

MEDIA LITERACY, EDUCOMUNICACIÓN, MULTI-COMPETENCES MODEL, DIGITAL LITERACY, SPAIN

### Authors Note

**Carmen Marta-Lazo** :: University of Zaragoza, Spain :: [cmarta@unizar.es](mailto:cmarta@unizar.es)

**María del Mar Grandío Pérez** :: Catholic University San Antonio, Murcia, Spain :: [mgrandio@ucam.edu](mailto:mgrandio@ucam.edu)

This article proposes a critical perspective on the tradition of media literacy research in Spain in order to examine how Spanish scholars are facing the challenges media education policy, in particular on development of school curricula. Research in media literacy (known as *educomunicación* in Spanish) has moved forward through the interest of scholars and other groups, such as media practitioners and school teachers, who have raised awareness on the need to develop a critical and creative media learning system.

This article will first review the background and development of media literacy research in Spain. From a theoretical point of view, the Spanish tradition in media literacy has been influenced by its cultural and linguistic proximity with Latin American countries, where media literacy enters into the framework of community development studies and uses parameters of visual literacy and linguistics. To a lesser extent, media literacy research in Spain has also adopted the theoretical approaches of some European researchers, such as those involved in cultural and reception studies.

Secondly, the educational model has changed in recent years, moving towards the promotion of participatory culture and civic media literacy. Current Spanish school curricula integrate information and digital skills at all levels. While it takes into account the views of the European regulatory framework, the role of media literacy promotion is limited to achievement of the general objectives for each educational level. The school curricula do not contain specific courses focusing on this topic of growing importance. The implementation of media literacy has largely depended on the capacity and willingness of individual teachers. In fact, it has often been the case that the pressure to complete the mandatory school curricula discourages many teachers from devoting class time to media literacy content. Regardless of the political party in power, there has not been sufficient support from the public administration to make this subject compulsory within the school curricula. Although educational policies have focused on diffusing the use of technological platforms such as the press, video or computers as educational resources, there has been no development of a media education based on a multi-competences model.

This article will pay special attention to the results of a recent study conducted across all regions of Spain on the level of audiovisual and digital literacy (Ferrés et al, 2011). The analysis indicates the areas with greater deficiency (e.g., ability to perceive aesthetic, ideology and values conveyed by media), and pinpoints technology as one of the most used tool. Finally, this article will draw upon some education and policy recommendations to help gain more support among academia, media and citizens in the European and Latin American context.

## BACKGROUND OF MEDIA LITERACY RESEARCH IN SPAIN: THE EUROPEAN AND HISPANIC HERITAGES

Research on media education started in the mid-1980s, when communications had already been established for several years as an independent field of study. The term *media literacy*, used and promoted by UNESCO, covered all the processes related to the development of communications with educational purposes and vice versa. As described in *Media Education* published by UNESCO, this discipline includes

*all ways of studying, learning and teaching at all levels (...) and in all circumstances, the history, creativity, use and evaluation of media as practical and technical arts, as well as the place occupied by media in society, their social impact, the implication of media communication, participation, modification of the mode of perception they bring about, the role of creative work and access to media.* (Morsy, 1984: 8)

The Declaration<sup>1</sup>, adopted by the 1982 International Symposium on Media Education in Grunwald (Germany), already highlighted the strong convergence and synergy between the fields of communication and education, concluding that post modernity requires the union between the two disciplines. It underlined that media should serve as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society, and that public policies should be put in place to promote critical understanding among citizens of the communication phenomena. Thus, the Declaration on Media Education called for media education that promoted the growth of users' critical awareness and advocated that educational programs should include content analysis of media messages as well as creative expression and active participation. The approach integrating the two fields of *educomunicación* (education and communication) originated from the fact that both areas propose replace the paradigm of 'transmission' with that of 'mediation'. It is not just 'passing a message, information, or content', but also thinking of the appropriation of knowledge and the way interpretations are modified by receivers' relations with the environment. Essentially, this change of paradigm implies a shift from the notion of 'transceiver' to 'orchestra'. In this new framework, educational communication and the constructed knowledge are primarily regarded as a product derived from the receivers' interactions within their environment, especially their peers but also all other components of the educational environment and the media context. In this sense, rather than being mere co-receptors, citizens are 'active builders' who actively participate in the creation of the message by curbing meanings and providing feedback, using as a filter all the 'pre-existing conceptions' collected from their environment, media, Internet, and social networks.

In a study sponsored by the European Commission (Pérez Tornero, 2008: 23-24)<sup>2</sup>, European experts propose to base media literacy strategies on three pillars:

1. Media education as a teaching tool to acquire new skills;
2. Strengthening of capacities for media creation and production;
3. Increasing citizen participation through civic involvement with media and society.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/MEDIA\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/MEDIA_E.PDF) (04.12.2012).

<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/media-content/media-literacy/studies/study.pdf> (04.12.2012).

As explained by Manuel Area Moreira, Begoña Gros and Miguel Ángel Marzal (2008: 49), there are three approaches to the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in regards to civic development:

1. Understanding the meaning of being an 'informed citizen';
2. Developing communication and research skills;
3. Developing participatory skills based on responsible actions.

All these approaches are elaborations of previous research conducted in the final quarter of the twentieth century in Europe, (Area Moreira, 2004: 65-67). This research used a variety of analysis frameworks such as (i) capacitation on technical dimensions of the media, or (ii) socio-ideological analysis of media messages.

This model of media education (*educación mediática*), based on the concept of an active, social and creative citizenship, has been developed in different Latin American countries through CIESPAL (International Center for Higher Studies in Journalism for Latin America) in Ecuador, the ILCE (Latin American Institute for Educational Communication) in Mexico, CENECA (Center for Research on Cultural and Artistic Expressions) in Chile, ESCAP (Service Center of the Popular Action) in Venezuela, ILPEC (Latin American Institute for Education and Communication) in Costa Rica or the Project LCC (Critical Reading Communications) in Brazil. There have also been outstanding personal contributions in some Latin American countries, such as Chile (Fuenzalida and Hermosilla, 1991), Mexico (Charles and Orozco, 1990), Colombia (Martin-Barbero, 1987), Peru (Quiroz, 1992), Argentina (Prieto, 1994) and Uruguay (Kaplun, 1998).

Each of the mentioned variants may be related to the 'endogenous' educational model as proposed by Paulo Freire (1976), since they all emphasise the educational process and focus on the individual, who through media literacy achieves a critical interpretation and transforms the world. From a media education perspective, José Martínez de Toda (1999) proposes a multidimensional model that describes the different stages of citizen development ("literate, aware, active, and social critic") until they become fully 'creative subjects'. In this approach, subjects ultimately turn into producers of content, which can be easily related to the concept of 'prosumer' as coined by Alvin Toffler in his book "The Third Wave" (1980). According to Toffler consumers in the post-industrial era should have control over the time and content of their media consumptions, and private companies would grant the ability to design and produce customized products.

Methodologically, some researchers have attempted to apply qualitative research methods to their works on active audience, including in-depth interviews and focus groups. We can find various studies in Europe that are framed by the cultural studies approach of as elaborated by the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the mid 1970s. The studies under this approach consider social practices as the context of citizen relationship with the media, which could be easily connected to the so-called 'mediation' by Latin authors (Martin-Barbero, 1987; Orozco, 1996a). Other authors who influenced the studies on *educación mediática* in Spain include Stuart Hall (1980), David

Morley (1986), Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1988), Sonia Livingstone (1990) or Dorothy Hobson (1990). As qualitative studies are rooted in theory of reception in Latin America, we should also include contribution from studies by Mario Kaplún (1998), Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987), Néstor Canclini (1990), Valerio Fuenzalida and María Elena Hermosilla (1991), Len Masterman (1994), Guillermo Orozco (1996) and Ismar De Oliveira (2000). Guillermo Orozco (1996a, 1996b), one of the most remarkable scholars on media education in the Spanish and Latin American context, highlights the importance of qualitative research in order to understand the different social mediations that influence the audiences at a macro level (politics, economics, ideology, culture ...) and a micro level (human interactions: family, work, neighbours, etc...).

Significant qualitative research has been carried out in Spain relating to active reception and education. Among those efforts we can find a multi-authored work entitled "TV, Curriculum and Family" (Aparici and García Matilla, 1995), which discusses all actors of the learning process (individual subjects, family, education system and television media). This study uses qualitative methods of analysis such as focus-groups formed by children, parents and teachers. Other significant studies on active reception using qualitative research methods include those conducted by José Antonio Younis (1988), Marisa García de Cortazar et al. (1998), Agustín García Matilla, Javier Callejo and Alejandra Walzer (2004), Amelia Álvarez, Miguel Del Río y Pablo Del Río (2003), Carmen Marta-Lazo (2005), Yolanda Montero (2006) and María del Mar Grandío (2009), among others.

### MAIN PROJECTS, RESEARCH GROUPS, SCIENTIFIC FORUMS AND EXPERIENCES FOCUSING ON MEDIA EDUCATION IN SPAIN

The trajectory of projects related to media education in Spain has not been as fruitful or wide as in other countries and, therefore, the consolidation of this area has been weak and slow.

The first actions came from education programs of the regional governments and media. As part of those efforts, a number of projects such as *Prensa Escuela*, *Atenea*, *Alhambra*, *Mercurio*, *Zahara XXI* or *Atlántida* were created. In most cases, those programs were limited to using press, video, new technology, television, and Internet as sources of information, without considering them as a source to develop further, for instance as critical or creative thinking. Parallel to the education policies focused on a technological approach, there have been joint initiatives among journalists and teachers to support media literacy, whose practical actions to raise awareness of the need for a critical and creative media learning system can be understood as one of the most productive and positive response of the civic society on media education in Spain. To mention just a few, these initiatives include in Catalonia, *Mitjans* (an initiative focusing its actions, including media literacy issues, on the publication of newsletters and organizing workshops on Communication and Education), or *Comunicar* (a group that conducts training activities, including curriculum guidelines or conferences and seminars). There are also other well-known initiatives such as *Spectus*, *Teleduca*, *HEKO Kolektiboa* or *Entrelínies*. However, it

should be pointed out that the above joint initiatives among journalists and teachers have hardly reached any citizens over the past years because they target teachers and students of primary and secondary schools but not other sectors of the society.

At the university level, there are no significant actions to educate students on media literacy. The only courses or seminars found are related to Communication and Pedagogy studies, so these actions do not reach students in other fields. Nonetheless, the role of media literacy research is noteworthy. The first doctoral thesis on media literacy dates from the late 1970s and early 1980s, and research groups in Spain (García-Matilla, 2006: 289-292) are currently generating research projects on media education from a Communications perspective, funded by public administrations at a regional and national level. Among them we find (i) in Barcelona a team led by Joan Ferrés at Pompeu Fabra University, and others with Lorenzo Vilches and José Manuel Pérez Tornero, at the Autonomous University of Barcelona; (ii) at the University Complutense of Madrid, Mariano Cebrian Herreros, Francisco García García and Antonio Sanchez Bravo; (iii) at the University of Valladolid (Segovia campus), Agustín García Matilla. In the Canary Islands, José Antonio Hernández Younis, and (iv) at the University of Seville, Francisco Sierra Caballero. In the field of Education, it is worth highlighting the work undertaken at (i) the University of Huelva, with José Ignacio Aguaded as principal researcher of the Group *Comunicar*, (ii) in Seville, Malaga and Granada, the groups led respectively by Julio Cabero Almenara, Manuel Cebrian de la Serna and José Antonio Ortega Carrillo, all focused on the area of educational technology, (iii) in the Canary Islands, the team of Manuel Area Moreira and, (iv) at the University of Valladolid (Segovia campus), with Alfonso Gutierrez as lead researcher.

In addition, it is worth mentioning the efforts undertaken at the Spanish Open University UNED. The team, led by Roberto Aparici and Sara Osuna and the *Centros de Profesores* (CEPS) organization, offers multiple courses and workshops aimed at increasing teachers' capabilities on media and digital technologies. As for monographic scientific forums specifically on *Educomunicación*, we should highlight (i) the International Congress of Pedagogy of the Image, which began in the early 1990s; one of the first congresses was held in A Coruña, and it has run several editions so far, (ii) all three editions of the International Congress on Education and the Media, organized at the University of Valladolid (Segovia campus), for the first time in 1997, as well as (iii) the various conferences organized by the *Comunicar* Group ("Lights in the Audiovisual Maze" in 2003, "Television Quality" in 2005, "Educating the Look" in 2007). In 2011, two forums were created with the purpose of bringing together the best examples of European and Latin American Media Literacy or *Educomunicación*: (i) the First International Conference on Communication and Education, organized at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and (ii) the First Congress on Digital Education, held at the Segovia campus of the University of Valladolid.

## ACADEMIC POLICY RELATED TO DIGITAL COMPETENCE IN FORMAL LEARNING

Spanish education policies take media and new technologies education into account, yet implementation in the classrooms has been insufficient. In most cases, media education is based on mere instrumental training in technological applications, without being the object of study (Gutiérrez, 1997: 95).

As far as legislation on the education system is concerned, the Education Law 2/2006 included the concept of "basic competences" of the school curriculum which should lead to a more precise definition of the education and training students should receive (preamble LOE, 2006: 17162)<sup>3</sup>. Among the eight competences been set in the curriculum of primary education (Royal Decree 1513/2006, 7 December) and Secondary Education (Royal Decree 1631/2006, 29 December), one is the so-called "Information processing and digital competency", which is regulated in the two Royal Decrees as follows: This competence consists of having the skills to search, find, process and communicate information, and to transform it into knowledge. It incorporates various skills, ranging from access to information up to its communication in various formats once processed, including the use of information and communication technologies as an essential element to be informed, learn and communicate.

In relation to the curriculum for primary education (Royal Decree 1630/2006, 29 December), the law establishes that it is the school system's responsibility to promote, among other things, early initiation experiences in information technology and communications (Article 5, section 3). This requires, as in the law, initiation in the use of technological tools such as computer, camera or audio and video players, such as communication elements, approaching audiovisual productions such as movies, cartoons and video games, critical approach of its contents and its aesthetics, progressive distinction between reality and visual representation and taking gradual awareness of the need to moderate use of audiovisual media and information technology and communication. Regarding Secondary Education (Royal Decree 1631/2006), the law stipulates that school curricula should include the promotion of basic skills in the use of sources of information. It notes, however, that media competence should be included in all subjects and courses. At the University Level (Royal Decree 1393/2007: 44046), the law agrees that education will ensure, among other basic skills, that students should have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to make judgments that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical and convey information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists and non-specialists.

To sum up, it can be said that relevant legislation on the Spanish education system does cover the acquisition of digital competences. However, the current framework does

<sup>3</sup> (Preamble LOE, 206: 25) in translation of the law, available on [http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Spain/Spain\\_LOE\\_eng.pdf](http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Spain/Spain_LOE_eng.pdf) (12/12/2012).

not regard as mandatory the implementation of a course on media literacy, as it has been recommended by the European Parliament. As explained above, the current educational framework in Spain regards media education as a subsidiary, transversal subject that plays a supporting role in the achievement of the core contents of the school curriculum.

### **AUDIOVISUAL COMPETENCE AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP: A PIONEERING RESEARCH**

Defining the concept, dimensions and indicators of audiovisual and digital competence is not an easy task, considering how fast technological changes affect the dynamic relationship between media, ICT and citizens. Precisely, the Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (CAC) has funded a pioneering research in Spain, led by Joan Prats Ferrés from the University Pompeu Fabra (2006) to define audiovisual competences. Based on an input from 45 experts in Ibero-America, the proposals were discussed in a scientific seminar involving 14 Spanish scholars. The team elaborated a final document defining "media competence" within the EU framework of the *Education and Training 2010* and directly related to the concept of "digital competence" used by the Council of Europe.

According to this document, the two criteria for media literacy levels are: (i) the interaction between emotion and rationality (citizens should be able to rationalize the emotions that are involved in media receptions), and (ii) interaction between critical reading and creative expression (citizens should be able to make a critical analysis of media products consumed and to produce media messages) (Ferrés, 2006: 11). The six dimensions covered by media competence are: language, technology, media programming and production, ideology and values, media reception, and aesthetics. Joan Ferrés and Alejandro Piscitelli (2012: 75-82) have recently revised the indicators contained in each of these dimensions.

In order to shed light on the measurement of media literacy, the Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (CAC) and the University Pompeu Fabra launched a new project, once again led by Joan Ferrés i Prats, between 2007 and 2010. This research analyzed the media competence of Spanish citizens through several indicators. It provided quantitative results from 6624 surveys among the 17 Spanish regions (Ferrés et al, 2011). The results confirmed the low level of media competence among Spanish citizens in general. Indeed, only 4.6% of the people who took the survey could be considered literate in this area. The dimension where Spanish citizens ranked highest was 'technology' and the issues where they ranked lowest were aesthetic, and ideology values. Given the links between media literacy and the levels of governability of a country, this investigation recommends the implementation of media education into the curricula at all levels of formal education.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON EDUCATION AND POLICY

Despite the fact that media literacy has become an area of great interest for Spanish policy-makers, teachers and scholars there is still much work ahead in order to increase current media literacy levels among Spanish citizens. For that to happen, the following are some recommendations that will help gain more support among academia, media and citizens within the European and Latin American context:

**1) Inclusion of the course on Media Education (*Educación Mediática*) in the mandatory school curriculum.** It is necessary to integrate the teaching of media literacy into the school curricula at all levels of formal education, as was first called for by the European Parliament in 2009. To date, Spanish education policies have been quite lax in including media education in school curricula and it has been reduced to a transversal competence rather than a subject by itself. Furthermore, the initiatives implemented have had a large focus on the instrumental side of media literacy, devoting most of the efforts to teaching the management of systems and use of technical equipment. There has been insufficient critical understanding of communication and citizenship participation in the media, as described by UNESCO in 1982 and in the Grunwald Declaration.

**2) Establishing a multidimensional education.** The school curricula should integrate a media education course in which students are required to develop all dimensions of digital competition. The six dimensions introduced by Ferrés (Ferrés et al., 2011) could serve as a baseline for creating a multidimensional framework: language, technology, programming and production processes, ideology and values, audience reception, and aesthetics. At a first stage, experts should agree on the basic contents needed to have the most impact on multimedia competence and make the students multimedia and multiliteracy competent. Once defined, those goals should be incorporated into the school curriculum. Given the widespread use of Internet and social networks, this course should address civic media literacy.

**3) Promoting media education among adults, and especially the elderly.** Media educations should not just focus on youth and children. Media literacy policies must also address adults even if no specific institution exists that can easily reach them all (as easily as schools attended by all children) (Livingstone, 2011). Research suggests that adult development of media literacy depends less on age or prior knowledge than on the existence of a powerful motivation (Livingstone et al., 2013). Some extraordinary experiences at Spanish universities challenge the belief that the eldest segments of the population are reluctant to use new technology. As success stories have shown, elderly people can be as competent as youth in handling technology to communicate with their children or with people of their own age.

**4) Supporting the role of *Educommunicators*.** Isolated experiences of teachers involved with media education have always been found, but these individual efforts must be scaled-up and underpinned by a solid public policy framework. In Spain,

many professionals and teachers do not have sufficient training in media education, so post-graduate education must be promoted, as well as workshops and other training initiatives, to create a well-trained professional body in the field. Attention should also be given to other stakeholders in the education system, such as parents. For example, the number of parents associations should be increased, and those already existing should be encouraged to organize talks and workshops on media literacy.

**5) Establishing an independent State agency to regulate media content with enforcement capacities.** In Spain, there is no agency at the State level with a mandate to regulate and monitor media content, specially the protection of childhood. The experience of the Audiovisual Councils in Spain is so far reduced to some regions like Andalusia, Navarra and Catalonia. An even among the existing ones, only the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia meets on a regular basis. Although their activities and research have been enriching and there have been attempts to create an Audiovisual State Council, this project has fallen through due to partisan conflicts.

**6) Creating educational programs and encouraging quality content on media.** Media should promote public service integrating educational spaces on TV, specially at the stations affiliated to a public broadcasting system, such as Televisión Española (TVE). To date, commercial channels have shown a marginal commitment to innovative cultural, high quality content.

**7) Supporting further research in order to consolidate knowledge and share best practices with other countries, specially, in South America and Europe.** Since research on the media literacy field has been marginal in recent years, it is necessary to support the development of a methodological framework to assess media literacy in Spain, as well as to monitor the efficiency of new public policies arriving in that area. This framework would preferably be aligned with other efforts undertaken in other partner countries, especially European, in order to facilitate cross-comparisons and knowledge sharing initiatives.

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## KRITIČKI POGLED NA ISTRAŽIVANJA MEDIJSKE PISMENOSTI U ŠPANJOLSKOJ: OBRAZOVNI I POLITIČKI IZAZOVI

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Carmen Marta-Lazo :: María del Mar Grandío Pérez

**SAŽETAK** Članak donosi kritički pogled na tradiciju istraživanja medijske pismenosti u Španjolskoj s ciljem da se ispita kako se španjolski znanstvenici suočavaju s izazovima u javnim politikama, osobito pak s izazovima u školskom kurikulumu koji se tiče medijske pismenosti. Istraživanje medijske pismenosti (šp. educucomunicación) u Španjolskoj je opstalo zbog interesa znanstvenika, ali i drugih društvenih grupa, poput novinara ili školskih učitelja, koji su podigli razinu osviještenosti javnosti o potrebi razvijanja kritičkog i kreativnog načina učenja o medijima. Ovaj će članak dati pregled europskog i latinskoameričkog naslijeđa medijske pismenosti u Španjolskoj, glavnih postojećih istraživačkih grupa i projekata koji se temelje na obrazovanju za medije te akademskih politika koje se odnose na digitalne kompetencije u formalnom obrazovanju. Konačno, ovaj će članak dati preporuke za obrazovanje i politike koje će potaknuti stvaranje veće suradnje između znanstvenika, medija i građana u europskom i latinskoameričkom kontekstu.

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### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

MEDIJSKA PISMENOST, EDUCOMUNICACIÓN, MODEL VIŠESTRUKIH KOMPETENCIJA, DIGITALNA PISMENOST, ŠPANJOLSKA

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*Bilješka o autoricama*

**Carmen Marta-Lazo** :: Sveučilište u Zaragozi, Španjolska :: cmarta@unizar.es

**María del Mar Grandío Pérez** :: Katoličko sveučilište San Antonio, Murcia, Španjolska :: mgrandio@ucam.edu