

Editorial

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Media proficiency, an educational initiative that cannot wait

La competencia mediática, una acción educativa inaplazable

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Editor

In these times of deep crisis, audiovisual communication is taking on an ever-increasing importance in the context of the digital society in which we live; communication technologies are present in all aspects of daily life and the consumption of media is growing and unstoppable, especially with the overwhelming presence of smartphones that have invaded all the spaces we move in. Videogames, televisions and computers in all their forms, and smartphones, are everywhere to the extent that the time spent in front of a screen by all sectors of society now takes up most of the leisure time of the citizens of all four corners of the world. Yet in the face of this barrage of media, citizens have developed few formative experiences for acquiring these audiovisual and media languages or for increasing their audiovisual and media skills. Neither education centres nor civic associations or the media...have encouraged the development of audiovisual proficiency as the key to fomenting critically and audiovisually «competent» citizens.

In 1977 Umberto Eco stated that «a democratic civilization will only save itself if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection and not an invitation to hypnosis». More than 30 years later, to be able to control the capabilities needed to encode and decode audiovisual messages has become a form of literacy as basic and fundamental as traditional reading and writing. The language of the image, fixed or in motion, must necessarily be a civic competence for creatively appropriating messages and avoiding potential manipulation. Technologies can now reach undreamed of limits, not only for their ability to broadcast images but also for their seductive potential, their subtly produced language and their insistent messages...By contrast, we cannot say the same of the efforts to educate citizens to see the image as a stimulus to critical reflection, rather it is based on the absurd scientifically demonstrated premise that media consumption is a guarantee in itself of audiovisual learning, when studies seem to indicate the opposite, that high media consumption leads to a loss of perspective and greater blurring between fiction/reality and the impairment of the ability to fully comprehend the messages.



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The mere consumption of media products is insufficient for acquiring an awareness of the reach of audiovisual content. Transforming the image into an opportunity to reflect critically enables an ability to distance oneself from one's own feelings, to know how to identify the motives behind the media's magic, to understand what is explicit and implicit in the stories and information...and above all to be able to establish coherent, critical relations between what appears on the screen and the reality of the world outside. And all this impossible without knowing the degree of audiovisual proficiency in citizens and their social possibilities in real contexts, in order to achieve an optimum level of preparedness.



The new generations of children and youngsters are of particular concern. As Prensky stated in 2001, when he coined the delightful description «digital natives», and wrote in «How Teens Use Media. A Nielsen Report on the Myths and Realities of Teen Media Trends» (2009) that «young people handle digital media with a lack, or very little, knowledge of the power of the audiovisual». Undoubtedly children and young people have set off along the digital path but without full knowledge of what the media are.

In general audiovisual proficiency is an underexplored field of study. There are few works that analyze how much we know or understand of all the elements that make up an audiovisual medium especially in terms of the more vulnerable segments such as infants and teenagers. The dizzying dynamic of change we are subjected to comes with an array of communication tools that children and youngsters use, and which are ever more complex and with new supports that update at great speed. Hence, in order to create educational programs that promote the understanding of audiovisual media and how they are produced, it is vital to start by knowing the extent of current levels of proficiency and to scientifically diagnose the real state of the question.

Since 2010, the Ministry of Economy and Competition has been developing a Coordinated I+D+i Project (www.competenciamediatica.es) to elaborate an integral conceptualization of the term «audiovisual competence» in the digital environment for use within different fields of intervention: the educational system, the media, universities...It is a fact that audiovisual communication competences are rarely ever assessed because they hardly ever get taught in a systematic way, and they are probably not taught because since they are not evaluated there is no awareness of the deficiencies in this field.

This study, in which 20 Spanish universities participate and which is coordinated by Joan Ferrés (Universitat Pompeu Fabra-Barcelona), Agustín García-Matilla (Universidad de Valladolid, Campus de Segovia) and Ignacio Aguaded (Universidad de Huelva-Spain) is justified on the grounds that there can be no effective evaluation systems without first defining the knowledge, skills and attitudes deemed necessary to have acquired to enable a citizen to be considered audiovisually proficient. So for the first time in Spain, we have set about detecting in a systematic and rigorous way the media needs and shortcomings of a significant sample of the population as well as planning global strategies and training programs for the government, the media and the different sectors involved: students, teachers, parents and society in general.