



## ENHANCING MEDIA LITERACY

One aim of The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media

compiled by Cecilia von Feilitzen



What do we mean by 'media literacy'? Concepts, definitions and meanings vary. People who speak of 'media education' often refer to the school and the role that it can play in order to media-educate children and young people. 'Media literacy' implies that we all must be media literate –not only children and young people, but also parents, school teachers and other media educators, as well as media professionals and politicians.

During the last two decades, ever-larger parts of the world were flooded by TV sets and satellite channels. In 1996, 7 out of 10 households worldwide were estimated to own a TV set. This represented a 100 per cent increase in terms of channel expansion, hours of television watched and television sets possessed by households since the end of the 1980s (Lamb 1997). In addition, computers with Internet connection are spreading, especially among well-to-do households and countries, and the video and computer game industry has become the fastest growing and most profitable entertainment business aimed at children and young people. Cell phones are multiplying exponentially, facilitating mobile access to the Internet.

The rapidly changing media landscape –which also implies a convergence of media, such that radio, film, television, digital games, newspapers, books, etc., are available on-line– has intensified public debate as regards both hopes and fears. Not least, the enormously rapid spread of satellite television across national borders in the early 90s aroused fierce debate over the world about the influences of entertainment violence. In connection to this, several discussions emphasised the importance of establishing an international knowledge centre on children and media, with special attention to media violence, that could document, give an overview of and synthesize scientific knowledge on these topics.

UNESCO and the Swedish government showed particular interest in bringing about such a centre. After an international seminar on media violence in 1995 in Lund, Sweden, the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research –Nordicom at Göteborg University,

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was asked to take responsibility for the establishment of *The UNESCO International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen*. The overall point of departure for the Clearinghouse's efforts that started in 1997 is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Of special significance in this respect are Article No. 13, which states that the child shall have the right to freedom of expression, and Article No. 17, which refers to the media's important function to ensure that the child has access to material aimed at the promotion of his or her well-being and to encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from injurious material.

During the almost ten years of the Clearinghouse's existence, its perspectives and activities have widened –media violence must be seen in a broader context. Media violence is not only entertainment violence of physical character, but includes 'real-life' representations of violence and many different forms of structural violence, e.g., discriminating portrayals of gender, ethnic and other social groups, cultures and nations. It is also closely interwoven with other media phenomena, such as the increasing amounts of advertising and the consumption societies. And although the Clearinghouse collects, documents and informs about research from all over the world, best practices about what to do must be taken into consideration as well. The media environment that children and young people meet in their everyday lives—comprising also most of the 'adult' media output— must be related to a relevant balance of regulative measures versus promoting media education or media literacy. In line with these considerations, in 2002 the name of the knowledge centre was changed to *The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media*.

The aim of the Clearinghouse is to increase awareness and knowledge about children, youth and media, thereby providing a basis for relevant policy-making, contributing to a constructive public debate and enhancing children's and young people's media literacy and media competence. In addition, it is hoped that the Clearinghouse's work will stimulate further research on children, youth and media.

The Clearinghouse, which is carried out in co-operation with UNESCO, financing jointly with the Swedish government, informs various groups of users around the world— researchers, policy-makers, media professionals, voluntary organisations, teachers, students and interested individuals. To this end, yearbooks, reports and a newsletter are published. Some of the themes of the yearbooks, presenting articles by scholars from different regions of the world, have been: media violence; media education/literacy; young people's participation in the media; video and computer games; pornography and sex in the media; media globalisation; media regulations; soap operas and reality TV; and democracy and public

service.

The Clearinghouse's web site ([www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse)) contains, among other things, information on these publications, newsletters in full, a literature database on media violence, a database on and links to relevant institutions and networks in the world, international declarations and resolutions concerning young people and media and information about international coming events. At present, the Clearinghouse is also building up a database on media literacy covering related research, organisations, educational material and much more.

One central idea nourishing the Clearinghouse's activities is the establishment of an active global network, telling about important research and events in the field. Interest in the network continuously increases, and today there are about 1,000 participants representing a number of different users from more than 125 countries. The newsletter, in turn, has 2,500 subscribers in 150 countries.

## WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

As hinted at, an increasing amount of the Clearinghouse's efforts focus on media literacy research and media literacy practices over the world. But what do we mean by 'media literacy'? Concepts, definitions and meanings 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 and where 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, school teachers and other media educators (in many voluntary organisations worldwide), as well as media professionals and politicians. There are also 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. I.e., 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 and definitions are more explicitly used in Africa, Asia and Latin America than in richer parts of the world.

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

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 that 'media education' ought to embrace whether it is called media education, media literacy, education for communication through the media or else. Among the main 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 they 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 thus 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.

thus, also contributes to protection in itself) is 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)) and commissioned reviews of media literacy among children and young people (Buckingham 2005) as well as adults (Livingstone 2005).

The European Commission, which launched a public media literacy consultation to take place between October and December 2006, 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’ (<http://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’.

## CONCLUDING WORDS

There are many signs that 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 others are converging in several respects. Consequently, a common understanding of what media literacy is seems to be growing over the world.

The next 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 are quite well ahead, at least when it comes to media literacy education in school). Nevertheless, in the medialised societies of today democracy –or access to power and possibilities for social change– means necessarily that all shall have access to, understand, participate and produce contents in all kinds of media.

To join the Clearinghouse network or subscribe to the newsletter see <http://www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse> (tick ‘About us’) or e-mail [clearinghouse@nordicom.gu.se](mailto:clearinghouse@nordicom.gu.se)

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(<http://www.nclis.gov/libinter/infolitconf&meet/post-infolitconf&meet/PragueDeclaration.pdf>)

Recommendations addressed to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation UNESCO adopted by the Vienna Conference "Educating for the Media and the Digital Age" 18-20 April 1999

[http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media\\_literacy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media_literacy/index_en.htm)

[http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media\\_literacy/of\\_med\\_lit/whatis](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/of_med_lit/whatis)

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