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Current Policy Developments in European Media Literacy

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Introduction

In August of 2009, the European Commission issued a formal recommendation on media literacy adding to a series of initiatives underway since 2006 to build a comprehensive European media literacy policy (Commission of the European Communities 2009). Media literacy is now a well-established concept referring to the ability to critically understand and use media in a variety of contexts (see Aufderheide 1997). Recognising that the way people use media is changing and that the volume of information received is enormous, the Commission notes that all citizens need to have the ability to access, analyse and evaluate images, sounds and texts on a daily basis especially if they are to use traditional and new media to communicate and create media content. As such, the recommendation urges the media industry and member states to do more to increase people's awareness of the need for media literacy across all media forms including advertising, cinema and online, and to ensure that citizens do not get left behind in the fast moving media landscape. The level of interest shown by the European Commission in media literacy might seem surprising given that more often than not it is seen as interested in only supporting market dimensions of media. The following therefore asks what has prompted this interest and identifies possible benefits to researchers and educators.

The Transition to Digital

One of the elements triggering this interest in media literacy derives from political pressure from the European Parliament urging the Commission to promote media literacy as part of a wider agenda in support of citizenship, greater cultural diversity, and the public interest in matters of media development. At the parliamentary

hearings prior to Commissioner Reding taking up her new mandate and subsequently in the Weber report (Committee on Culture and Education 2006) on the transition from analogue to digital television, the Directorate General for Information Society and Media (DG INFSO) was specifically requested to launch an initiative on media literacy. Digital television is a project central to current Commission policies whereby all member countries aim to shut down their analogue television networks on or around 2012, and as a result reap a large dividend in terms of released spectrum. The change brought about by such a transition is disruptive and confusing to many citizens across the EU27, and accordingly the European Parliament instructed the Commission to ensure that new digital television platforms should be used to deliver media pluralism in a regionally, culturally and linguistically balanced way and that all citizens would be assured of the possibility of taking advantage of the benefits of the information society. In this context, the Commission was specifically requested to produce a communication on media education as a means of 'giving thought, at European level, to the sociocultural implications of the digital society and the adaptation of national education systems to the cultural and social changes brought about by new technologies, convergence and digitalisation' (2006: 5).

Media Literacy and the Market for Audiovisual Media Services

One of the most important developments in promoting media literacy at a policy level is its inclusion within the terms of the Audiovisual Media Services Without Frontiers Directive (AVMSD), an indicator of the high importance attached to it within the European policy framework. The AVMSD is the pre-eminent instrument of European media policy (Commission of the European Communities 2007a), and replaces the previous Television Without Frontiers Directive which operated since 1989. The new directive entered into force in December 2007 and member states have two years to transpose the new provisions into national law, so that the modernized legal framework for audiovisual media services will be fully applicable by the end of 2009.

The introduction of media literacy as part of the AVMSD comes as part of a package of measures to ensure an effective European single market exists for audiovisual media services. Responding to technological developments and seeking to create a level-playing field in Europe for emerging audiovisual media services, the Directive

provides for 'less detailed and more flexible regulation and modernises rules on TV advertising to better finance audiovisual content'. With proliferating services across television, cinema, video, websites, radio, video games and virtual communities, media literacy, in the Commission's view, is required to make informed choices and to provide the critical, evaluative skills necessary to navigate a complex and crowded audiovisual space.

> The AVMSD has been designed to offer 'a comprehensive legal framework that covers all audiovisual media services (including on-demand audiovisual media services), provides less detailed and more flexible regulation and modernises rules on TV advertising to better finance audiovisual content'. Responding to the massive technological changes underway within the media environment, the directive seeks to create a level-playing field in Europe for emerging audiovisual media services. The key pillars of European audiovisual policy remain: cultural diversity, protection of minors, consumer protection, media pluralism, and the fight against racial and religious hatred. In addition, the new Directive aims at ensuring the independence of national media regulators.

The Directive articulates a European policy commitment to enhancing public awareness of the importance of media literacy, defined as:

> the skills, knowledge and understanding that allow consumers 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. They will be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material. Therefore development of media literacy in all sections of society should be promoted and monitored (Commission of the European Communities 2007a: para 37).

The definition is not as expansive as in other communications described below and appears restricted to exercising 'informed choice' and making use of new technological opportunities. Arguably, the definition is a market-oriented one, with the consumer rather than the citizen in mind, and one which seeks to offset the effects of weakening controls and regulation of the market by placing the responsibility on individuals to protect themselves and their families. Other opportunities for the development of media literacy are also referenced in relation to measures for the protection of minors and human dignity and for exercise of the right to reply. In the context of wider European media policy, however, its inclusion is highly significant

as is the requirement within the Directive for the Commission to report from 2011 on to the European Parliament on levels of media literacy in all member states.

European Commission Initiatives

For its part, the European Commission has taken up the theme of media literacy with vigour and, despite some of the competing and occasionally contradictory interests involved, has made media literacy a cornerstone of the current regime. One of its first initiatives was to convene an Expert Group, comprising leading educationalists and researchers, to analyse and define media literacy objectives and trends, to highlight and promote good practices at European level and to propose actions in the field. Areas that the expert group were specifically asked to address included the importance of promoting the protection of children, young people and human dignity in the media, and support the creation of a media environment appropriate for citizens' social, educational and cultural needs.

A public consultation was also launched in 2006 to identify existing and possible approaches to media literacy and to provide a description of its emerging trends throughout Europe. Submissions to the consultation broadly endorsed the Commission's definition of media literacy, adding the ability 'to create and communicate messages'. Issues relating to the aims and target audience for media literacy initiatives supported a view of media literacy as a key requirement for citizenship in the information society, and a basic element of lifelong learning. This was followed by a research report *Current trends and approaches to media literacy in Europe* (Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona 2007) which provided a Europe-wide map of media literacy implementation as well as individual country profiles.

A major building block of European policy on media literacy was added at the end of 2007 with the publication by DG INFSO of the European Commission of a Communication on Media Literacy. Building on the work of the Media Literacy Expert Group, the public consultation and the publication of the research report, the Communication sought to complement the AVMSD and chart a course for further action in the field. As the first formal policy document on the area at EU level, it focuses on the three areas of commercial communication, audiovisual works and

online communication. The Communication's definition expands on that contained in AVMSD and presents media literacy 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'. Levels of media literacy are described as including:

- feeling comfortable with all existing media from newspapers to virtual communities;

- actively using media, through, inter alia, interactive television, use of Internet search engines or participation in virtual communities, and better exploiting the potential of media for entertainment, access to culture, intercultural dialogue, learning and daily-life applications (for instance, through libraries, podcasts);

- having a critical approach to media as regards both quality and accuracy of content (for example, being able to assess information, dealing with advertising on various media, using search engines intelligently);

- using media creatively, as the evolution of media technologies and the increasing presence of the Internet as a distribution channel allow an ever growing number of Europeans to create and disseminate images, information and content;

- understanding the economy of media and the difference between pluralism and media ownership;

- being aware of copyright issues which are essential for a "culture of legality", especially for the younger generation in its double capacity of consumers and producers of content.
(Commission of the European Communities 2007b: 4)

Highlighting good practices and policy objectives in the three areas of commercial communication, audiovisual heritage and online, the Communication calls on member states to:

- encourage the authorities in charge of audiovisual and electronic communication regulation to get more involved and to cooperate in the improvement of the various levels of media literacy defined above;

- promote systematic research into and regular observation of and reporting on the different aspects and dimensions of media literacy;

- develop and implement codes of conduct and, as appropriate, co-regulatory frameworks in conjunction with all interested parties at national level, and promote self-regulatory initiatives. (Commission of the European Communities 2007b: 8-9)

While the above emphasis might be seen to overly focussed on commercial communication and issues of online safety, the more recent 2009 Recommendation issued by the Commission expands the approach to media literacy promotion to be more inclusive of all relevant European and local institutions, and is framed within a broader context of the importance of cultural diversity within the information society (Commission of the European Communities 2009). The twin emphases of the policy state that, on the one hand, greater levels of media literacy would support the European objectives for a more competitive knowledge economy and at the same time contribute to a more inclusive information society.

The recommendations as presented in the Commission document address two key constituencies: relevant regulatory authorities within member states and media industry interests (Commision of the European Communities 2009). Regulatory bodies are urged to promote media literacy through appropriate codes of conduct supporting the specific measures addressed within media literacy debates, to find opportunties to raise awareness, to promote systematic research, following on EU-wide research outcomes and to support incorporation of media literacy within the core national curriculum. For their part, media industry interests are asked to create user-friendly information and awareness-raising campaigns about media processes and their economic underpinnings, about data security in the digital environment and informing citizens about the creative economy and the role of copyright.

There are a number of major constraints, as the policy acknowledges, to further progress on media literacy at the European level. There is, for example, as revealed in

the 2007 Commission study, a lack of shared vision and a lack of European visibility for the initiatives that do exist at national, regional and local level, as well as low levels of cooperation between stakeholders. Consequently, greater efforts are needed to build consensus on essential aspects of media literacy (definitions, objectives) and support the analysis and exchange of good practices on media literacy in the digital environment. This, the Commission intends to pursue through a range of existing programmes such as the MEDIA 2007 programme as well as through institutions and organisations such as UNESCO, Council of Europe and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. But preeminent among the mechanisms available to the Comission is the implementation group of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the AVMS Contact Committee, which will oversee the requirement within the directive to report on levels of media literacy across Europe from 2011.

For this purpose, a consortiun of academic and industry groups led by the European Association of Viewers Interests (EAVI) was commissioned to develop assessment criteria and tools for measuring media literacy levels in Europe. The study, finalised at the end of 2009, identified measurement criteria for a combination of individual competences (communicative abilities, user behaviour, knowledge about media and media regulation) and environmental factors (media availability, policy towards media literacy and access to media education). That Europe should take a lead in in mobilising media literacy as a quantifiable indicator of achievement of information society goals is, according to the study, inevitable:

> Historically, Europe has served as a cradle of (media) civilization, as well as a focus for the coordination of debate, criticism, and unchecked invention. Europe has been at the centre of the philosophical, literary and technical evolution of media, grounded as it is in a tradition of communication and interaction with its roots in public engagement and civic engagement. It is therefore natural that Europe should take the lead in addressing the development of media literacy as a social and scientific imperative. (EAVI 2009: 4)

Quantifying the relationship that citizens have with media, indivdually and collectively, across Europe and harnessing this knowlegde to increase media literacy levels as a whole is a bold and highly ambitious undertaking. A preliminary application of the tool and an assessment of media literacy levels understandably reveals large variation across Europe with recognisably higher levels in those countries with a commitment to media education and established traditions of civic

participation via the media, and noticeably lower levels in other parts of Europe where such features are absent. Whether such data can be effectively mobilised and can win the support of industry, governments and publics in raising awareness of the issues and promoting new public initiatives remains to be seen.

A European Media Literacy?

The question remains whether these initiatives, valuable as they are, add up to a comprehensive and coherent Euopean approach to media literacy. The most common criticism of European media policy has been its tendency to neo-liberalism and the favouring of the interests of large-scale media businesses over those of the citizen and society as a whole (Goodwin and Spittle 2002). For critics, the marginal role given to media literacy within the context of a very large industry regulatory framework might be seen as little more than a sop to civil society groups given the scale of liberalisation within the market. Yet, this would be unfair, one could argue, to the very substantial efforts being undertaken by a host of pan-European groups comprising educationalists, academics, researchers, regulators, industry representatives, civil society organisations and others who have focussed their efforts in favour of building consensus around a conception of media literacy as a core element of citizenship in today's Europe and engaging with such efforts as the European Charter for Media Literacy as well as international efforts to map, coordinate and stimulate new approaches to media education (Frau-Meigs and Torrent 2009). The European Union itself, as Bekkhus and Zacchetti (2009) remind us, grew out of a particular form of regional cooperation, which has developed with a deep political commitment to democracy, human rights, and the enhancement of citizenship'. In this sense, the instrumental functions served by media literacy are only part of the story. The objectives of developing a better informed and media literate citizenry in Europea support a more fundamental goal of promoting a more democratic and humane society with communication and responsible media practice at its core. Maintaining this as an emphasis within media policy debate is an important and worthy objective and merits further support and input from the academic community as a whole.

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